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## RENDERING SERVICES IN CHILD AND YOUTH CARE CENTRES: EXPERIENCES AND CHALLENGES OF SOCIAL WORKERS

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### ABSTRACT

Effective social work services in child and youth care centres (CYCCs) depend on how social workers deal with the associated experiences and challenges. This study explored social workers' experiences and challenges in rendering services in CYCCs in the Tshwane municipal district. A qualitative research approach employing the phenomenological design was adopted, and in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted. The findings confirmed that social workers have various positive and negative experiences and face multiple challenges in rendering services in CYCCs. Several suggestions to improve service delivery in CYCCs are made.

**Keywords:** social worker; experiences; challenges; Child and Youth Care Centre (CYCC); social work services

### INTRODUCTION

Almost 2,7 million children worldwide live in alternative care such as foster care or *child and youth care centres (CYCCs)* (Petrowski, Cappa & Gross, 2017). International trends highlight the importance of reuniting children with their families and reducing the number of children in alternative care (Petrowski *et al.*, 2017). In South Africa, 62,1% of children aged 0 to 17 years live in multidimensional poverty and are exposed to acute deprivation regarding their health, education and living standards. Some children may require legal intervention and placement in alternative care settings for various reasons, including endangerment of their lives, neglect and abuse (Statistics South Africa, 2020). The Children's Act 38 of 2005 (RSA, 2006) provides guidelines for the identification of children who require care and safeguarding; such children include children left without parental care, with unruly behaviour patterns, street children,

children who are habitual drug users, and those who are physically and mentally mistreated (Ziyambi, 2020). Community residential options rather than placement in CYCCs are the preferred alternative care for children after legal interventions, such as foster placements (Yorke, 2016). The South African Children's Amendment Act 41 of 2007 (RSA, 2008) promotes preventative and early-intervention services for children needing alternative care instead of initiating legal interventions and alternative care placements (Strydom, Spolander, Engelbrecht & Martin, 2017). Social welfare services and social workers' responsibilities are to ensure alternative care for an increasing number of orphans and vulnerable children (Patel, 2015).

In South Africa, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the challenges in providing adequate services to children in CYCCs. The limited resources and capacity to deliver effective services were further strained during the COVID-19 pandemic (Haffejee & Levine, 2020). The South African Children's Amendment Act 41 of 2007 (RSA, 2008) stipulates that a social worker rendering services in a CYCC must ensure that children in their care are safe, their needs are met, and their rights are always protected. In addition, section 75(1) of the Act stipulates that CYCCs must offer developmental, therapeutic and recreational programmes to address children's needs. Social workers, therefore, play a vital role in implementing the abovementioned services in CYCCs.

South African social welfare and service delivery have changed considerably over the past 20 years (Patel, 2015; Sibanda & Lombard, 2015). A social development perspective and a rights-based approach were adopted to promote social justice and render social welfare services to the most disadvantaged, including children (Patel, 2015). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children (UNCRC) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) safeguard the rights of children in South Africa (Ndonga, 2016). The government's philosophy regarding social welfare service delivery in the current socio-political dispensation is stated in the White Paper for Social Welfare (1997). This White Paper aims to ensure that social welfare programmes and services meet the needs of disadvantaged individuals and the most vulnerable groups in society. In addition, the Department of Social Development's Framework for Social Welfare Services (2013) prioritises service delivery to specific target groups such as children and the youth.

In terms of Section 212 of the Children's Amendment Act 41 of 2007 (RSA, 2008), the duties of social workers rendering services in CYCCs are summarised as follows:

- Assessing the children concerned to determine a care strategy;
- Drawing up individual developmental plans (IDPs) for each child;
- Ensuring that staff working with children implement the IDPs;
- Ensuring that the therapy children receive aligns with the care plan;
- Ensuring that case conferences occur with other professionals involved in a child's case;
- Monitoring the development of children and intervening when necessary;
- Preparing children who are to leave care before they have reached the legal age to leave successfully;

- If there are siblings, ensure they are kept abreast of decisions regarding the child or children concerned;
- Facilitating all visits to children to protect them from possible harm and trauma.

The vital role of social workers working with children in CYCCs is documented in Section 212 of the Children's Amendment Act 41 of 2007 (RSA, 2008) and several South African studies (Agere, 2014; Molepo, 2015; Thesen, 2014). In addition, international studies confirm that rendering services to youth and children in CYCCs is emotionally demanding (Madden, Scannapieco & Painter, 2014). Several international studies of service delivery in the child and youth care field state that social workers' emotional difficulties are poorly researched (Antonopoulou, Killian & Forrester, 2017; Barford & Whelton, 2010; Madden *et al.*, 2014).

South African studies on service delivery in CYCCs focus on the experiences and challenges of *child and youth care workers (CYCWs)* who work with various child-related problems (Greyvenstein, 2010; Jamieson, 2013; Mhizha, 2020; Molepo, 2015; Thesen, 2014). Some studies were conducted on the experiences of children in CYCCs regarding the role of CYCWs, their challenging behaviours and cultural identity, and their experience after they had left CYCCs (van Breda & Frimpong-Mansu 2020; Glover, 2018; Heathcote, 2015; Malatji & Dube, 2014; Moodley, Raniga & Sewpaul, 2020; Yorke, 2016). Although several South African studies have been conducted on CYCCs, only a few examine the experiences and challenges of the social workers in CYCCs. Given this knowledge gap (Barford & Whelton, 2010), this study aimed to develop an in-depth understanding of the experiences and challenges of social workers rendering services in CYCCs and to suggest improved service delivery initiatives for social work practice.

Research on the experiences and challenges faced by social workers rendering services in CYCCs is limited (Antonopoulou *et al.*, 2017). The first author became aware of the challenges encountered by social workers in CYCCs when she was employed at a CYCC. It was noted that some of the challenges stemmed from children inappropriately placed in CYCCs, for example, children with severe mental and behavioural challenges and the difficulties encountered in transferring them to appropriate care. This may be attributed to the fact that Act 38 of 2005 (RSA, 2006) did not make specific provisions for addressing alternative options of care for children with severe mental and behavioural issues, and are these children presently accommodated in CYCCs, resulting in the need for more social workers and specialised programs to address their unique needs adequately. Another challenge the first author noted was the experiences of social workers employed in CYCCs attempting to render family reunification services to children living in CYCCs. Implementing the new Children's Act 38 of 2005 (RSA, 2006) is challenged because of a shortage of social workers and the consequent ineffective delivery of reunification services. The result of such limited or inadequate rendering of reunification services is little or no movement of children out of CYCCs, thus creating frustrations for social workers working in CYCCs. Children, therefore, become long-term residents of CYCCs. Considering this, the study aimed to develop an in-depth understanding of the experiences of and challenges for social workers rendering services in CYCCs and to proffer suggestions for social work practice. The research question from the problem identified

is as follows: “What are the experiences of and challenges for social workers rendering services in CYCCs?”

This article will first describe the background and theoretical framework of the research. Secondly, the research methods will be explained. Thirdly, the findings of this research study will be unpacked, discussed and compared with relevant literature. Finally, recommendations for social workers rendering services in CYCCs will be made.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The authors adopted an ecosystems perspective, a blend between general systems theory and the ecological perspective. The ecological perspective was proposed in the 1970s by Bronfenbrenner (1979), who emphasised the interaction and interdependence of individuals and their environment (Mbedzi, 2019). On the other hand, the general systems theory was initially developed by von Bertalanffy in the 1950s. It provides an understanding of the arrangement of relations between the different parts of systems that connect them into a whole, for example, families, organisations and communities (Mbedzi, 2019).

The ecosystems perspective suggests that an individual exists in various settings, starting with the closest interactions and extending outward to the multiple subsystems associated with their interactions with their environment (Duerden & Witt, 2010). The ecosystems perspective includes four systems: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem (Mbedzi, 2019).

These different systems are interconnected and interdependent and must be understood based on the principle that people are in relationships and interactions with one another and within the broader context of systems which influence their functioning (Mbedzi, 2019).

In this context, the microsystem may be described as the direct interaction between the individual and the social workers rendering services to the children in CYCCs (Kirst-Ashman, 2017). The mesosystem includes the links between the various microsystems in the environment (Molepo, 2015). Therefore, on the meso level, social workers have multiple stages of involvement in rendering programmes involving group work activities, coordinating and negotiating services for children with other stakeholders (schools, family visits and other therapeutic activities), as well as engaging in interactions with other staff and members of the multidisciplinary team. The exosystem includes settings that do not involve the person directly but is indirectly experienced, such as gaining access to resources in the community and community risks (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The macrosystem of the social worker rendering services in a CYCC may include the influence of governmental policies and legislation, which involves a more comprehensive social policy and sociocultural setting (Molepo, 2015). Bronfenbrenner’s ecological system also includes a fifth system, namely the chronosystem. The chronosystem is a system that focuses on time and the impact of change over time or transition as the person develops (Jeronimus *et al.*, 2013). The chronosystem is essential because it refers to the constant evolution and development over time in child and youth care which influence all the other systems. The chronosystem also relates to the influence of a person’s experiences through time because of environmental and life-changing events (Jeronimus *et al.*, 2013).

Applying the ecosystems perspective in the proposed study, the authors described the interactions between social workers and their working environment and the influence that the multiple systems with their interactions have on the delivery of social work services in CYCCs. This situation includes the children, the multidisciplinary staff, the organisation and the community (such as schools, churches, biological parents or caregivers, and externally designated social workers), welfare policies and applicable legislation.

The research methods, which are informed by the background and theoretical framework, will be discussed next.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

A qualitative research approach was adopted as appropriate for the authors to explore and describe the experiences of and challenges for social workers rendering services in CYCCs (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition, the nature of the qualitative approach allowed the authors to investigate the natural and real-life experiences of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The phenomenological design, using the hermeneutical sub-design, was employed in this study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The hermeneutical sub-design of the phenomenological research design was adopted because it helps describe and interpret people's daily lived experiences and interactions (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition, the study had an explorative purpose because of the incomplete knowledge base and lack of research on the experiences of social workers rendering services in CYCCs (Engel & Schutt, 2010; Gray, 2013).

The research population from which the sample was drawn consisted of social workers rendering services at registered CYCCs in the Tshwane municipal district of the Gauteng province. Social workers working within the geographical boundaries of the Tshwane district in the Gauteng province were considered for the research population to draw the sample. Statistics show that the Gauteng province accounts for over a quarter of all national CYCCs. In contrast, the Free State and KwaZulu-Natal collectively account for between 16% and 18% of all CYCCs in the country (United Nations Children's Fund, 2020). The authors selected the five best-established registered CYCCs in the Tshwane district. A non-probability sampling method, purposive sampling, was used to select participants who met the selection criteria and could contribute the most valuable information (Bless, Higson-Smith & Sithole, 2013). Potential participants included males and females from different ethnic groups employed at the selected, registered CYCCs in Tshwane. Additional inclusion criteria were that participants had to have practised social work for at least one year at a CYCC and could converse in English. Most South African social workers can speak English. Therefore, this specific criterion was included. Participation in the research study was voluntary.

The data collection method was semi-structured interviews using an interview guide to obtain in-depth information from social workers on their experiences and challenges while rendering services at CYCCs (Strydom & Bezuidenhout, 2014). The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The qualitative data analysis framework consisting of Tesch's eight steps (1990), as described by Creswell (2014), was utilised for the data to be coded and categorised into themes and subthemes. An inductive approach to data analysis was followed, which involved data analysis based exclusively on the participants' experiences (Azungah, 2018). The inductive

approach to data analysis entails moving between data analysis and the literature in a recursive process to make meaning out of emerging concepts. The services of an independent coder were enlisted to analyse the data set, independently substantiating the findings and enhancing the trustworthiness of the results. Data saturation was reached after ten interviews. Data were collected until the information became repetitive, and no new information was obtained; thus, data saturation was reached (Bless *et al.*, 2013).

Various strategies proposed by Guba and Lincoln (Lietz & Zayas, 2010) were adopted to enhance the study's trustworthiness. Firstly, credibility was achieved by presenting data accurately, and it was maintained by using peer debriefing. The latter included consulting other professionals knowledgeable in the field of CYCCS throughout the research process and sharing perceptions and insights with them. Member checking was also utilised, which entails confirming the findings with a few of the participants. Furthermore, observer triangulation was used by employing an independent decoder to analyse the data and then comparing the data analysis of the first author's findings with the analysis of the independent decoder during a consensus meeting. Secondly, transferability was ensured by using thick and detailed descriptions in reporting the research findings to enable replication of the study and to ensure that the study can contribute to future social work practice (Lietz & Zayas, 2010). Thirdly, dependability was ensured by keeping the evidence of the entire research process for future review. Lastly, considering confirmability, the researchers described the research process in detail and confirmed the findings against the relevant literature (Lietz & Zayas, 2010).

Ethical matters were addressed during the planning and designing phase of the study and throughout the research process by adhering to specified ethical guidelines (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researchers abided by the ethical principles of informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality regarding the management of information and the identity of participants, along with making debriefing services available if requested by participants. A University Ethics Committee gave ethical clearance for the research study (Ref: SWREC-49131249).

## **FINDINGS**

The research findings are presented in two sections, including the participants' demographic profiles and the themes and subthemes in the participants' accounts, complemented by a literature control.

### **The demographic profile of the research participants**

The 10 participants who met the inclusion criteria for the study were recruited from five CYCCs in the Tshwane district of Gauteng. The 10 participants were all female, and most had been employed for four years or longer at their respective CYCCs, with only two participants employed for two years and one participant for three years at the CYCC.

The years of social work experience in social work practice were extensive, with one of the participants having 30 years of experience. Another participant had 22 years of social work experience. Two of the 10 participants had about 25 years of experience, and one had 15 years of social work experience. One participant had 11 years of experience, and three had six years of social work experience. Only one social worker had two years of experience in social work

practice. The findings indicated that most participants were immensely knowledgeable in social work practice. Eight of the 10 participants had the role and responsibilities of a social worker at a CYCC, with one participant who was a social work manager and one participant who was employed as a supervisor.

### Themes and subthemes

This research article presents the themes and subthemes focusing on the experiences and challenges of the participants rendering services at CYCCs. An overview of the themes and sub-themes of this study's findings is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Themes related to the experiences and challenges of participants at CYCCs**

Themes		Subthemes	
Theme 1	Experiences of participants rendering services in CYCCs.	Subtheme 1.1	Experiences of having positive relationships with staff and children
		Subtheme 1.2	Positive experiences of growth, resilience and development of the children
		Subtheme 1.3	Negative experiences relating to children's behaviour
		Subtheme 1.4	Negative experiences relating to the participants' workload responsibilities
Theme 2	Challenges experienced by participants rendering services in CYCCs	Subtheme 2.1	Challenges participants experienced relating to rendering reunification services.
		Subtheme 2.2	Challenges experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic

### ***Theme 1: Experiences of the participants rendering services at CYCCs***

The participants were requested to describe their experiences – positive and negative – in rendering services at CYCCs. The subthemes that emerged from the data analysis will be discussed and compared with findings in the literature, while the storylines will substantiate the underlying theoretical framework.

#### ***Subtheme 1.1: Positive experiences of growth, resilience and development of the children***

One of the positive experiences identified by the participants rendering services at CYCCs is described below in this subtheme.

Most participants reported that their positive experiences were related to the children's ability to grow (physically and emotionally), the resilience they developed to thrive in their present circumstances, and their successful development through the different child development stages into young adulthood. For example, several participants related their positive experiences as follows:

*To see the children grow, especially developmentally, because sometimes they come in here and they have never been to school. They don't know... Like in a toddler house, we admitted a child; he couldn't walk. He didn't have proper balance, he*

*struggled to walk, so his muscles were very poor and weak, so, then ... we do all kinds of things with them, activities, occupational therapy, therapy, and then you see how they develop. How they can. He started walking; he started climbing trees and jumping trampoline and recognising the different colours. So, you can see them grow and that's nice. (Tessa)*

*I had a guitar group, for example, he learnt to play guitar. I had a scuba diving project... He said he wanted to swim, and I taught him to swim, which was so special for me. I feel it is a privilege to be able to journey with these kids. And we taught him to swim; then we taught him to dive, and he literally was sponsored through Pedit-London. So, he had a dive master and instructor. And he has his own diving school and he's an absolutely fantastic young man. (Sabie)*

The storylines indicated that the participants' positive experiences regarding the children's successful development in the CYCC environment created feelings of work satisfaction and accomplishment. In a study on social workers rendering services to children, Berlanda, Pedrazza, Trifiletti, and Fraizzoli (2017) used the term "compassionate satisfaction" to explain the satisfaction social workers may experience stemming from their ability to assist others in achieving positive outcomes. Berlanda *et al.* (2017) highlighted the storylines of the participants describing their positive experiences of the children's abilities to grow and develop by stating that the positive relationships of social workers with their service users enhance their intrinsic job satisfaction and provide a sense of self-actualisation. Furthermore, the ecosystems perspective emphasises that persons' environments reciprocally influence each other (Mbedzi, 2019). Hence the views of the participants on their positive experiences of rendering services to children in CYCCs confirm that their interactions with the children in their working environment influenced their positive experiences in rendering services in CYCCs.

*Subtheme 1.2: Experiences of having positive relationships with the children and staff*

Berlanda *et al.* (2017:2) underlined the building of positive relationships in social work: "The main core of the social work profession has been the helping relationship". Positive relationships are essential with the children and in the broader context of service delivery in CYCCs, including other colleagues, CYCWs, management, and external stakeholders. A study conducted by Ehrhardt (2014) on workplace relationships found that positive interpersonal work relationships increase the possibility of higher effectiveness in job performance, assisting social workers in reaching their goal of rendering effective services to children.

Three of the participants commented on the satisfaction of positive relationships with children. Some participants' responses confirmed that establishing and maintaining positive professional relationships with the children often continued after leaving the CYCCs. A further rewarding experience for the participants was when the children gave them positive feedback about being well-adjusted and successful in their later adult lives.

*I always think of the kids that I have...you know; I always talk about my kids...the relationships that we formed. I'm still in contact with some of them. (Olivia)*



*I have so many stories I have contact with all my kids that are out and it's a long time so some of them would come, and this is their home... then they say please can I come and have a cup of coffee. (Mary)*

*Some of them you know...got married, have their own families and then they come back, and they come to brag with their spouses and the children, and they came, and they say thank you. (Gertrude)*

The ecosystems perspective stresses that relationships with the accompanying interactions and interdependence between people and their environment are vital in enhancing social functioning (Jeronimus *et al.*, 2013; Mbedzi, 2019). On the micro level of rendering services, the social workers are responsible for establishing relationships with the children and fulfilling responsibilities such as assessment, individual therapy and implementing individual development plans. To accomplish these tasks, social workers must build and establish a positive rapport with the children and others, such as the CYCWs and other staff members. The ecosystems perspective underlines that the interconnectedness of subsystems and relationships within one system will likely affect the relationships with the other systems (Mbedzi, 2019). The participants' positive relationships with the children also increased their work satisfaction.

Most participants experienced their relationships with CYCWs and colleagues as essential to establishing a working environment conducive to assisting the children. Participants described the importance of positive relationships in their workplace in the following way:

*I think something else that affected me positively is my good people relationships. I've got a very good relationship with my house parents [CYCWs] and as well as my children. (Olivia)*

*I think, in the CYCC, we are so close, we can actually call it a family. (Mary)*

The two participants highlighted the importance of constructive interpersonal relationships with other staff members, especially CYCWs, to promote the well-being of the children. Considering the ecosystems perspective, the participants' positive interactions with staff members and CYCWs confirmed how the work environment and reciprocal interactions influence one another and can affect the children's level of care. Building positive relationships with the children and other staff members is essential for social workers rendering services at CYCCs to increase positive outcomes. The positive experiences of mutual trust and cooperation in intra- and inter-service delivery with colleagues create a feeling of mutual support and employee satisfaction (Berlanda *et al.*, 2017).

### *Subtheme 1.3: Negative experiences related to the children's behaviour*

Most participants elaborated on the negative impact of the children's challenging behaviour on them in rendering social work services. For example, children in CYCCs often display problematic behaviour because they find it challenging to abide by the rules of CYCCs. This may be due to several factors, such as the high-risk environments they were in before being placed in a CYCC and the difficulty of having to adapt to a different value system than they were used to before being placed in the CYCCs (Glover, 2018; Johnston, 2015). The following

comments reflect participants' views on the behavioural problems of some children they encountered.

*I also think some of the severe behavioural problems the children have, and we are at times... You are not sure how to address their specific needs and you don't always have the services at your disposal to be able to address these needs immediately.*  
(Annah)

*The children using substances or abusing substances – that is a very negative experience for me.* (Fiona)

*We don't have systems in place to help us. We had a very big problem with dagga so if a child is positive for dagga, we help them but there are no in-patient facilities for girls. I have four children here who need those centres because even the house parents cannot handle their bad behaviour... Yes, and that makes our work so difficult, and we have to start our own systems because we don't get any help.*  
(Gertrude)

*My car has been thrown with stones by the children, so their acting behaviours sometimes affect you.* (Kate)

The participants' storylines indicated their negative experiences dealing with some children's behavioural problems at CYCCs. For example, the participants identified substance abuse and vandalism as negative behaviours that negatively affected their experiences while working in CYCCs.

Several authors have noted that social workers must often deal with multiple difficulties children experience in CYCCs, including learning and behavioural problems and developmental delays (Glover, 2018; Lopez & del Valle, 2015; Yorke, 2016). In addition, in CYCCs, the social workers often must render services to children who exhibit behavioural problems such as truancy, stealing, running away, aggression, substance abuse, inappropriate sexual behaviour and developmental problems. Consequently, social workers may often become discouraged, frustrated and dissatisfied with their work environment (Thesen, 2014).

It is only possible to discuss children's challenging behaviours in CYCCs by pointing out the influence of the interconnectedness of systems according to the ecosystems perspective, which guides this study. The challenging behaviours of children residing in CYCCs cannot be discussed in isolation from the various subsystems in the context of CYCCs where they were placed; one must consider the children's previous interaction with their environment and behaviours before admission to a CYCC (Glover, 2018). Therefore, it is crucial to consider the family, school and broader community as well as macro systems where policy decisions are made about children with challenging behaviour patterns (Glover, 2018). In confirmation of this subtheme and its supporting storylines, the participants indicated that they were overwhelmed by the difficulties of deciding how to respond to the children's behavioural difficulties. The findings of the Guarnaccia *et al.* (2020:8) study further indicated that social workers experienced frustrations when "faced with the feeling of not being able to provide adequate support for the minors or being incapable of helping".

The following storylines confirm the lack of specialised services to assist children with behaviour problems and the frustration participants experience.

*You get frustrated, and you get worried about the children... We don't always have the answers to the children's problems... We also struggle to get external therapeutic services and it's also frustrating because you know that a particular child needs emergency therapy so yeah that's a bit of a struggle. (Mary)*

*There isn't money for therapy, there isn't money for this so, everything is just being left. (Kate)*

The Children's Act 38 of 2005 (RSA, 2006: Section 194) on the norms and standards for managing CYCCs states that the necessary funds and resources must be available to operate CYCCs. The reality in social work practice, as experienced by the participants reflected in the abovementioned storylines, highlights the limited resources and funds to assist children with behavioural difficulties by providing the necessary specialised services. Guarnaccia *et al.* (2020) confirm that limited available resources and the scarcity of specialised services to assist children with challenging behaviours generate feelings of frustration and powerlessness among social workers. The ecosystems perspective underlines the issue that systems influence one another reciprocally, highlighting the negative influence children with behavioural difficulties have on the participants' work-related experiences, who cannot provide optimal care for the children in CYCCs because of limited funds and resources.

#### *Subtheme 1.4: Negative experiences relating to the participants' workload responsibilities*

Most of the participants indicated some negative experiences regarding their allocated workload. Several participants described their experiences associated with the excessive workload as follows:

*I think negatively it's ... What wasn't good for me was, for me, it took out my whole life because every time I would work from nine to five. I was there from eight till six because there isn't enough time to do the work. (Bianca)*

*Due to time and the huge caseload that they have, they can't see all the kids individually every day... So that makes it a little bit difficult. (Fiona)*

*I think the biggest challenge is admin... We have a lot of admin... We have eight hours of work, but the workload is about 10 to 12 hours. So, the admin is a lot... It's overwhelming. (Tessa)*

The participants' storylines speak of 'too little time and too many tasks' they must accomplish during working hours. The participants indicated that the number of children they must serve and their administrative responsibilities make their workload burdensome. Miller (2020) postulated that social workers working with children face higher caseloads, compassion fatigue and burnout, which may influence the rendering of effective services to this vulnerable population. Research findings support the experience of multifaceted stress factors in social workers' service delivery, which may harm their personal and work-related environments (Guarnaccia *et al.*, 2020; Miller, Grise-Owens, & Pachner, 2018; Miller, 2020). If the adverse

impact of work-related pressures on social workers' well-being is not addressed, the result can be high staff turnover and low work satisfaction (Shier *et al.*, 2012). The demanding nature of the participants' jobs influences their personal lives. One participant shared her sentiments as follows:

*It impacts your family life, for instance, having supper with your family, and then you get a call that there's an incident that you have to get up and go to handle immediately, so I think to make the switch and say: 'my work is done now' is quite an impossible statement. You have to set boundaries and it's your own responsibility you signed up for that but it's not so easy to just switch your mind off. I feel if you really enjoy what you are doing you care so much you won't switch off because you're thinking of plans for how we can solve this. (Eve)*

Confirming the demanding nature of the participants' work environment, Chauvain (2010) postulated that social workers in the child welfare sector face challenges, including high workloads and increasing administrative duties, all contributing to social workers' experiences of high-stress levels. Therefore, social workers need support structures and self-care strategies to mitigate the effects of their challenging work environment. Furthermore, Miller *et al.* (2018) stated that social workers not only have to deal with huge workloads but simultaneously with other stressors, such as a lack of resources, which may lead to them experiencing burnout and compromise the effectiveness of service delivery. Therefore, providing sufficient support structures will be crucial in assisting social workers in rendering effective services in CYCCs.

## ***Theme 2: Challenges experienced by participants rendering services in CYCCs***

This theme unpacks the challenges that social workers experience when they render services in CYCCs. Challenges are hindrances that prevent social workers from rendering effective services in CYCCs (Kirst-Ashman, 2017). The participants were asked to describe their challenges in rendering services in CYCCs. The challenges relating to rendering reunification services and challenges experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic will be addressed.

### *Subtheme 2.1: Challenges of participants relating to the rendering of reunification services*

Most of the participants' views relating to rendering reunification services included the uncooperative nature of the parents of the children and the external stakeholders rendering reunification services.

The following extracts from participants illustrate their challenges regarding reunification services.

*I don't think reunification services are always rendered. I think kids are placed here, and then the families are all forgotten about. And then, one day, the families, maybe the parents, get fed up with the kids being here and then they start throwing tantrums and they want their kids back... And then the kids are reunified, but then there were no services rendered. There is no proper support and systems... And then two years along the road, and then someone is applying for them to come back... So that is also something that's negative for me. (Tessa)*

*In some organisations, the social workers, they... It seems once they drop them [their children] off here, they think they are finished. Then you don't hear from them until it's time to renew the court order, and then they want to find out how the child is doing after being missing for almost two years. Now the social worker wants to know how the child is doing. Or they just phone you and say... they tell you; I must submit my section 38 in two weeks, but I haven't heard from you in two years' time, but you need the report from me. Sometimes it's difficult where there are no reunification services because we have parents who refuse to go for reunification; to report for reunification services. And then it's difficult to submit that report to the court and accept it because there are no reunification services. (Sabie)*

The participants' storylines indicated clearly that the cooperation and coordination of reunification services from external organisations are challenging. Parents or guardians who do not cooperate in service delivery for their children's benefit make rendering services even more difficult. The participants' responses refer to insufficient and ineffective collaboration and cooperation between the CYCCs' participants and the externally designated social workers, which may deprive the families and children of the opportunity to be involved in successful reunification processes (Karam 2014). The success of reunification services depends on the child and the parents being involved in family interventions, decision making and commitment to cooperate with the designated social worker. Geurts, Boddy, Noom and Knorth (2012) asserted that rendering reunification services entails a partnership between social services professionals and parents, and failing to fulfil this responsibility may cause children to be accommodated in CYCCs for an extended period, with little or no movement of children out of CYCCs, thereby causing frustration for social workers working in CYCCs (Agere 2014).

The study findings by Sauls and Esau (2015) indicated that reunification services are not effectively rendered because of high caseloads, limited resources and excessive administrative duties, which constrain the externally designated social workers in rendering these essential services. The study findings also indicated that designated external social workers might find it challenging to track nomadic parents in rendering reunification services (Sauls & Esau, 2015). In the light of the ecosystems perspective, it is vital to understand the challenges that affect social workers rendering services in CYCCs because of the interconnectedness and interdependence with external systems; these challenges include inadequate cooperation between the organisations and stakeholders rendering reunification services as well as the influence of these systems on rendering effective social work services in CYCCs (Mbedzi, 2019). In addition, the influences of the external stakeholders impacted the interactions of the other systems, namely the work of the social workers rendering services in CYCCs. In a broader context, this also negatively impacted the children's chances of being reunified with their original family system.

Furthermore, Sauls and Esau (2015) contend that poor collaboration between social services practitioners compromises the quality of services. The inadequate rendering of reunification services also affects the parents, who need the necessary support to change their psychosocial functioning to benefit their children. Collaboration between various stakeholders and management is required to address the challenges experienced by social workers in rendering

reunification services and in the effective coordination of services with CYCCs. Fragmented rendering of reunification services is causing children to remain in CYCCs longer than necessary, and parents need to be equipped to take responsibility for their children. Sauls and Esau (2015) argue that a supportive relationship between the CYCC and the designated social workers is crucial for reunification services to be effective.

*Subtheme 2.2: The challenges experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic*

The COVID-19 pandemic affected everyone. This study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic was experienced as a challenge to render the necessary services at CYCCs.

One of the participants indicated the funding challenges she faced.

*Like we aren't allowed to sign a service agreement now because we can't get a health certificate. If we have no service level of agreement, we won't get anything for the rest of the year. So, with regard to COVID-19, they did a funding for the first quarter for all the CYCCs and even though we haven't submitted a health certificate. (Bianca)*

Children in CYCCs depend on multiple care systems, and therefore they were particularly vulnerable during COVID-19. The COVID-19 lockdown was experienced as a challenging time because of the disruption of all services. But specific administrative processes still needed to be completed, which influenced the allocation of government funding for CYCCs. The findings of Wolfson-Vorster (cited in Haffejee & Levine, 2020) supported participants' responses in that many CYCCs could not renew their registration and hence could not access the necessary funding to support service delivery in CYCCs. The donors of essential items such as clothes and other necessities, the number of visitors, and other professional services rendered on-site to CYCCs were reduced to a minimum because all persons had to adhere to the national lockdown restrictions.

One of the participants elaborated on the lack of support systems during the national lockdown as follows:

*He [a child] sold all his clothes for drugs. We must get him new clothes because we didn't get donations because of COVID-19. (Olivia)*

The participant's response highlighted the devastating effect of the pandemic on the already limited resources and funding at CYCCs before the COVID-19 pandemic. The study by Fallon *et al.* (2020) confirms the participant's response, who stated that the lack of access to support systems such as donors impacted service delivery in CYCCs negatively because of the attempts to contain the virus.

Some participants highlighted several educational challenges experienced in CYCCs during the lockdown.

*I need to network with the schools at this stage because with the lockdown, we also... Everybody had to jump in; we also assisted with the home school type of thing. (Eve)*

*At this stage, I'm a teacher as well with the lockdown. (Gertrude)*

The participants' accounts are reflected in Haffejee and Levine (2020), who state that isolation and the absence of routines imposed by schools may also have led to psychological distress in children in CYCCs, and the absence from school may have potentially jeopardised future education prospects. In addition, many children in CYCCs also experience learning difficulties exacerbated by the education challenges they faced during the COVID-19 pandemic (Agere, 2014).

Maintaining social distancing and transport difficulties brought about by adhering to COVID-19 regulations was challenging. The following storyline attests to this:

*With lockdown regulations, our drivers who take children to school... it's a massive thing, so when all the children return to school, how will you do it? The social distancing like driving six times and school placements, is a big problem. (Sabie)*

The research findings in Haffejee and Levine (2020) support the response of the participant by describing the hazardous challenges of maintaining COVID-safe practices in communal living spaces, large numbers of children living in small areas, rostering of staff, health risks and new admissions, as well as having to deal with children absconding from and returning to care. These challenges were exacerbated by limited resources and limited means to quarantine children.

Another participant, who corroborated the various negative consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, pointed out that one of the biggest concerns was that the children were not allowed to visit their homes and guardian homes during the lockdown. One participant described the impact of the lockdown regulations on the children in the following words:

*This lockdown is working on the children emotionally; it significantly impacts them. Some children saw their parents or family in March, and ever since, only telephonic contact. (Annah)*

The study findings by Haffejee and Levine (2020) indicated that for many children in CYCCs, the lack of family contact was a significant stressor. Children were concerned for their parents' and siblings' well-being and feared they might not see some of their family members again (Haffejee & Levine, 2020). Social workers had to address the wide range of emotions children were experiencing in response to being under lockdown and dealing with their emotional distress. The ecosystems perspective states that interactive relationships are critical for every human being as they influence how people perceive life events, including the challenges confronting them (Espelage, 2014).

It is evident that the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted not only South African families by causing disruptions in the social and economic spheres but also in service delivery in an already strained CYCC environment with its limited access to resources and supportive networks.

## **DISCUSSION**

The primary focus of the research was to explore the experiences and challenges of social workers rendering social work services in CYCCs in the Tshwane district of Gauteng province.

CYCCs play an essential role in South Africa in providing services for children according to the Children's Act, 38 of 2005. Rendering social work services in CYCCs is a compulsory legislative requirement. Cognisance was taken of the current trend of moving away from residential care in CYCCs, nationally and internationally, as a primary alternative care option. Residential care is currently viewed as the last option on the continuum of alternative care options. Although the option of CYCCs is seen as a last resort for alternative care, the need for alternative care is increasing in South Africa.

In line with the ecosystems perspective, the social worker's role is interdependent with the functions of other systems such as CYCWs, resource providers, external stakeholders and children needing social work services. For example, the social worker cannot effectively render social work services to the children without the provision of support by the other systems.

From the participants' responses on their experiences of rendering social work services in CYCCs, it can be concluded that they have had various positive and negative experiences. The participants experienced work satisfaction and intrinsic fulfilment from the positive relationships with the other staff members and children and the growth, resilience and development they noticed in children. According to the ecosystem perspective, the influence of the working environment and various interactions with service users and other professional role players in CYCCs highlighted the complexity of the person-in-the-environment interactions, where negative experiences were also part of the social workers' experience while rendering services in CYCCs. The negative experiences were related to the complexity of the children's behavioural difficulties and not having the necessary specialised expertise and resources to assist these children with the care needed. Experiences of frustration at not being able to render effective services to children in need of specialised care because of lack of funding and resources, together with the realities of heavy workloads, have given rise to high-stress levels and the need to develop strategies to mitigate the possible effects of burnout and compassion fatigue.

One of the other challenges in rendering social work services was the difficulties experienced with collaboration and cooperation with stakeholders rendering reunification services. Various circumstances, such as insufficient external social workers and inadequate service delivery, meant minimal success in reuniting children with their families. As a result, children became long-term residents of CYCCs. The COVID-19 pandemic increased and exacerbated the strained service delivery system to children in CYCCs by exhausting the limited resources and funding. Another impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was the different roles the social workers needed to fulfil, despite their anxieties, to assist the children with emotional support and educational needs. The impact of minimal contact with their families and the uncertainties in children regarding the well-being of their families placed further pressure on social workers at CYCCs to deliver interventions.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following recommendations are suggested to assist social workers in rendering services in CYCCs.



- A review of the National Policy on Financial Rewards to CYCCs is recommended to increase the budgets of provincial governments in a way that will enable them to subsidise CYCCs more adequately to run their operations effectively.
- Child protection and care need to be a national strategic priority for the government, which will also assist in increasing funding to provide the multifaceted services that children in care need. In addition, the increase in funding will address the social workers' challenges regarding the shortage of specialist services for children.
- Restructuring or decreasing the workload of social workers rendering services in CYCCs is recommended. The participants of this study highlighted high caseloads as a stressful experience. This is not only a negative experience but is also a challenge, implying that the quality of social work services rendered to the children in CYCCs is not optimal, making it difficult for the social workers to fulfil all priorities and responsibilities. Therefore, the researcher would recommend that social workers be allocated caseloads that do not exceed the standard practice prescribed ratio of one social worker for 30 children to ensure that social work services are efficient and effective. A shortage of social workers rendering services in CYCCs is evident, but because of funding constraints, this matter cannot be addressed and needs to be renegotiated with the Department of Social Development; alternatively, the restructuring of services rendered in CYCCs must be investigated, so that more efficient and effective services can be rendered.
- A specific working document and agreement clause, initiated by the Department of Social Development or CYCCs management, which guides the collaboration and coordination between the social worker at a CYCC and the designated social worker rendering reunification services, should stipulate the roles, goals, responsibilities, scheduled meetings, visits and family meetings recommended to improve the degree of cooperation between these professionals.
- Professional development programmes for social workers are recommended, explicitly addressing the managing challenging behaviours in children.
- Building on the strengths of social workers rendering services in CYCCs, opportunities for continuous improvement in personal well-being, professional relationships, and job satisfaction should be provided.
- Future research may include developing risk management strategies for CYCCs with collaboration across multiple sectors for future resilience planning.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, social workers in CYCCs are committed to providing a stable and supportive environment with the necessary care for children. Still, they also face challenges that hamper the continuity and quality of care afforded to children in CYCCs. This study showed that social workers rendering services in CYCCs have positive experiences that were a source of motivation and work satisfaction to continue doing social work in CYCCs. However, on the other hand, negative work-related experiences may lead to tipping the scale detrimentally, with past experiences of frustration with managing children's behavioural problems and facing

challenges such as ineffective reunification services and poor management of the adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, relevant role players such as the Department of Social Welfare and the management of CYCCs need to follow up on the above recommendations to improve service delivery to become more efficient and effective.

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