

Social Support and Challenges on a Microsystem Level for Children in Government Residential Care in Pattani, Thailand

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Abstract

This study intends to specifically examine the social support on a microsystem level for children in government residential care in Pattani, Thailand (Pattani Home for Girls). This study will look at how to gain proper support from people who are directly involved with the children through social support challenges on a microsystem level as well as how to enhance the wellbeing of children in government residential care settings. In Pattani Home for Girls, 12 child caregivers participated as respondents. Following that, a theme analysis was performed. The findings of this study revealed that family, friends, and people surrounding the children were dimensions that had a significant influence on the challenges faced by the children while being in government residential care. Furthermore, this study strongly suggests that social support on a microsystem level for children should focus more on providing emotional support, such as encouraging and empowering them, showing a sense of love, providing a sense of care, increasing children's self-esteem, and increasing the positive ability to participate between children and those they should live with in and out of residential care, as these factors play a significant role in enhancing children's abilities for better wellbeing in the long run.

Keyword: Social Support, Social Support on Microsystem Level, Children in Government Residential Care.

Introduction

According to available global figures, more than 2.7 million children live in residential care settings (Petrowski et al., 2017), and unfortunately, the majority of these children require such support due to past histories of maltreatment, abuse, and neglect (Steenbakkers et al., 2018). Typically, painful experiences from maltreatment and disconnect from the children's biological parents may eventually affect the developmental and mental health of the children. This circumstance exposes children to various risks and implies children admitted to alternative care, either willingly or involuntarily, to protect and enhance their wellbeing (Turney & Wildeman, 2017; Cage, 2018; Fernandez et al., 2019).

Children and youths in residential care are noted to have poorer psychosocial functioning than children with their biological parents. It is observed that children in residential care have a high prevalence of emotional and behavioural issues, as well as psychopathological difficulties (Oswald & Goldbeck, 2009). In addition, they are likely to have endured abuse, neglect, and pre-placement trauma (Jee et al., 2010), which impacts their entire being and existence (Octoman & McLean, 2014). It has been demonstrated that these and associated challenges have a detrimental influence on these children even after they leave residential care (Rubin et al., 2007). Similarly, children in residential care must adjust to a period of separation from their biological family. In addition to all the additional difficulties that come with living in residential care, they must also learn how to interact with new adults and peers (Swick, 2007).

Furthermore, one of the factors that contribute to the risk and poor wellbeing of children who are placed in residential care is challenged on a microsystem level or through direct interaction in their environment, such as negative participation or lack of support from family, peers, or people with whom they have a direct relationship. Since the microsystem refers to the immediate environment in which individuals act and communicate, such as their relationships with their family and peers (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007), the microsystem level has the most direct influence on the outcomes associated with children, which consists of individuals and groups of individuals with whom the individual interacts and ascribes symbolic experience to those interactions. These direct influences include interpersonal relations within the family, peer groups, and school settings (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Moreover, many concerns in the family system were connected to children's well-being, such as parents' loving and caring, parents' pressure on children's ambitions, and the issue of trust between family members. Similar evidence from previous studies (Klocke et al., 2014; Casas & Gonzalez, 2017; Gomez et al., 2019) demonstrates that the interaction between individual characteristics serves as the most crucial component in children's wellbeing.

A social support system is certainly the most effective resource for ensuring the well-being of children in residential care, since such networks assist in dealing with the effects of problematic behaviours as well as the children's particular needs (Octoman & McLean, 2014). Social support is crucial to children's development, particularly throughout the transition from childhood to adulthood (Fomby & Cherlin, 2007; Okpych et al., 2018; Leon & Dickson, 2019). In addition, social support, particularly perceived appropriate social support from directly interacting individuals, is a significant factor in children's social adaptation and a crucial resource for coping with challenges and life's obstacles (Xin et al., 2019). Moreover, people with better social support, such as family and friends, are healthier physically and psychologically than those with lower social support (Xin et al., 2019). Furthermore, support from a family or caregiver will guide children in residential care through childhood and into adulthood with fulfilment (Schofield & Beek, 2009).

For Thailand, recent data (2019) from Thailand's Department of Children and Youth indicate that there are 6,513 children and youth residing in 30 government residential care institutions supervised by the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security. Although the government-run residential care for children in Thailand has offered services in a variety of sectors, the children still exhibit problematic conduct, have trouble adapting to other people, and have low self-esteem. According to studies (Supwirapakorn, 2007; Suwanasaeng et al., 2018) on children in residential care in Thailand, their experience in residential care, which includes challenges on a microsystem level, affects their perception of continuing to lead a

positive life after leaving residential care. Also, the terrible and difficult lives of children prior to being placed in residential care, such as the worst of their familial origins, may be profoundly ingrained and negatively impact their mental health for a long period of time. Therefore, both the proper engagement of individuals inside the residential care institution and the proper environment within residential care are crucial to consider for youth who have had a traumatic childhood. In addition, children in residential care will find fulfilment in the transition from childhood into adulthood if they have greater support and guidance from a family member or caregiver (Schofield & Beek, 2009).

The objectives of the current study are as follows by, a) To holistically examine the social support system through the social support challenge at the microsystem level of the children who have risen from government residential care in Pattani, Thailand, b) To shed light on the path of appropriate assistance for those involved at the microsystem level of the children, with the aim of enhancing their overall wellbeing while in government residential care, c) To determine how individuals in the surrounding community and in all areas who interact directly with children could provide proper support to children and ensure that their lives improve after exiting residential care.

Methodology

Study Population

For this study, selected child caregivers at the Pattani Home for Girls were asked to represent the children's perspectives. The researcher was not allowed to directly interview the children due to the rules of the Thailand Child Protection Act (AD, 2003), which stated that a child residing in residential care offered by the government has the right to be protected from face-to-face official interviews. In addition, previous research (Nuttarugs et al., 2012; Boonmaneeprasert, 2018) indicated that a child caregiver is the person with whom children spend most of their time and who actively engages with them daily while living in residential care. In order to obtain data on the influence of social support on children, the present study interviewed child caregivers whose daily responsibilities include providing direct care for the children at Pattani Home for Girls.

Sample Size Estimation and Method

This study used a purposive sampling method. Purposive sampling is suitable for choosing "difficult-to-reach, specialised populations" and fits itself well to qualitative research (Etikan et al., 2016). Child caregivers from Pattani Home for Girls participated in this study (Pattani Home for Girls). In semi-structured interviews, all child caregivers in a Pattani home for girls in Thailand were interviewed, a total were 12 of child caregivers.

Data Collections Method

The study was conducted through semi-structured interviews. It will be comprised of child caregivers at Pattani Home for Girls who were selected based on who spent the most time with and knew the most about the children at Pattani Home for Girls. A child caregiver, according to Suwansaeng et al (2018), is the person who spends the most time on activities in the children's daily routine, acting as both their parent and a role model. This interview attempts to examine the social support system on a microsystem level faced by the children, and it includes issues surrounding the effects of the social support system during life in residential care. The interview questions set the path for the interview, and the questions asked afterward confirmed this path.

The interviews were conducted with each participant (each interview was between the researcher and the child caregiver). Individual interviews provided a level of privacy that aimed to promote participant openness and comfort. The interviews lasted about 45-60 minutes and were done at a time and place that worked for the person being interviewed.

Data Analysis

All data from the semi-structured interviews was analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is the most prevalent and flexible analytic technique, allowing for a comprehensive and thorough examination of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is also a kind of qualitative analysis. It may be used to analyse categories and existing data-related themes (processes). It presents the facts in great depth and handles a broad variety of concerns through explanations (Boyatzis, 1988). Thematic analysis allows the researcher to accurately define interconnections and compare them across several contexts. Using theme analysis, it is feasible to link the many perspectives and viewpoints of the researchers and to compare them to the facts gathered from different circumstances and periods during the task. There are several viable interpretations (Alhojailan, 2012).

Results

The main themes that emerged from the respondents' interviews were the challenges they had with social support on a microsystem level while residing in government residential care. At the microsystem level, social support is described as the items that have direct interaction with the children, such as their parents, siblings, teachers, and peers. Relationships in a microsystem are bidirectional, which means that the children may both influence and be impacted by the views and behaviours of individuals in their surroundings (Schweiger & O'Brien, 2005). The dimension "microsystem level" includes support provided by family, child caregivers, friends, peers, and officers in government residential care. The function of microsystem social support will be linked to the children's microsystem social support challenge. The challenge of social support on a microsystem level reported by the informants of the study is problem of family support, bullying from school friends and feeling unacceptable.

Problem of Family Support

Problem of family support in the one of challenge that the children from government residential care in Pattani was facing and it was a constant factor reported by almost all the respondents (9 of 12 respondents). The respondents of this research used these words to explain the challenge support in micro system level in term of family support. They explained that the children here have negative affected from problem of family support or lack of family support. Some children showed the aggressive emotion, behavioral problem and less trusting to people around them once they facing with family problem support. Some children become hostile to child caregivers and refuse to participate in residential care roles, which even affect the children's ability to focus much on their studies. They also found the issue of mental health problems of the children, such as feeling more depression and isolating themselves from friends and society due to a lack of family support. Moreover, for children who have mental health problems, they are the group that needs more attention because they have emotional problems, behavioral problems, or physical problems as vulnerable children due to their family background, especially the problem of family support, and it's clear that it affects their negative emotions when they are living life in residential care. Regardless of the fact that

almost all of the survey respondents showed that family support, such as providing a sense of caring and staying in touch with the children, is a powerful source of better living, it can be an important source of support for children's wellbeing after they leave residential care.

Bullying from School Friends

One of the coding that the all 12 of respondents were presented about challenge of social support at microsystem level was *Bullying from school friends*. The result of the interview showed that the children have faced challenges with their peers in school. The respondents indicated that the children get Bullying at school, particularly in primary and secondary school creates stress and weakens children's confidence. The results also found that they also get lower self-esteem feelings than their friends from being ignored at school. It was clear that the interaction of their school friends affected the children's feelings and behavior. As a result, the children exhibit aggressive emotions and rude behavior. Moreover, the bullying from school produces negative effects on the children's ability to isolate themselves from other people. The results also showed that the bullying from school friends makes the children experience difficult living conditions and makes them lose confidence in living in school.

Feeling Unacceptable

The all respondents were presented the word of *Feeling unacceptable* as the one of the challenge of social support at microsystem level of the children. The majority of the respondents showed that the children in residential care were facing feelings of being unacceptable by other people outside of residential care. They have to deal with some interaction from people outside of residential care, especially when some people show them that they are focusing on children who stay in government residential care, so it makes the children feel lower than their other friends because they feel they lack biological parents to stay with them. Due to the obvious stigmatization and negative thinking about persons outside of residential care, they believe that people outside of residential care are unacceptable and worthless. Moreover the respondents presented that the children have aggressive behavior when their needs are not be acceptance.

Discussion

Respondent findings revealed that family, friends, and people around the children were dimensions that had a significant influence on the challenges of the children in Pattani Home for Girls. It showed the children's lack of family support, and it led to the children's having aggressive emotions, behavioural problems, and being less trusting of people around them. They also discovered mental health issues in the children, such as feeling more depressed and isolating themselves from friends and society as a result of their family background and lack of proper support from their biological family.

According to the current findings, the children in the Pattani Home for Girls face similar challenges due to their bi-o family background. Since child caregivers and officers play an important role as parents to the children in residential care, this can make the child caregivers and officers worry more about how to help and understand the children who come from bad homes and are in residential care. As well as a result of a previous study, the research by Mortimer and Larson (2002) found that support from family is an essential contributor to a child's successful transition to adulthood and that family support is one of the factors that can influence the development and happiness of children. Many family structure issues, such as parents' loving and caring, family pressure on children's preferences, and the issue of trust

among family members and people around them, were linked to children's well-being. Therefore, if this assistance is not provided, poor emotional and transitional consequences will occur, making it more difficult for children to have excellent mental health and become productive adults (Uyan-Semerci & Erdogan, 2017).

Moreover, the current findings revealed that the support from friends and the interaction of their school friends affected the children's feelings and rude behavior. This was due to the fact that the children were bullied by their classmates as a consequence of their staying in government residential care, which set them apart from the rest of their classmates. In addition, it places children in difficult living conditions, causing them to lose confidence in their lives at school. Aside from the problems posed by individuals in their immediate environment, the majority of respondents reported that children in residential care were also confronted with feelings of being unacceptable from people outside of residential care. The children who reside in government residential care feel unacceptable to other people and useless as a result of the stigmatisation they experience. Receiving a feeling of unacceptableness affected the children's sense of self-worth and confidence, and some exhibited aggressive behaviour and resisted the residential care role.

Furthermore, in accordance with research by Whetten and colleagues (2009), residential care is mainly utilised for children who are considered unable to live in a family context and is therefore considered a "last resort." This is detrimental as it sends a negative message to society that only the "worst" children live in residential care, which can lead to low self-esteem and a lack of confidence in living in the community among some other people. In addition, lacking support from school in terms of providing stability, emotion, and continuity gained in school longer enables young people to become lower achievers (Ungar, 2013).

In particular with respect, given the current finding of challenge at the microsystem support level above, it is evident that the children in Pattani Home for Girls face multiple challenges as a result of their placement in government residential care, such as peer bullying and negative perceptions from people with whom they communicate directly. Consequently, it is evident that living in government residential care has a detrimental influence on the children who are placed there, as well as building a negative image from being in government residential care. Consequently, it should be considered the outcome of the negative image of children in government residential care and the negative view of people who view them, since both have lengthy effects on the children's loss of confidence in living and subsequent socialisation process.

Recommadations

From the result of the study, it is strongly recommended that the support sectors related to children on a microsystem level should be more concerned with providing emotional support, such as encouraging and empowering children, showing a sense of love, and providing a sense of care to the children, since the current finding shows these play a critical role in establishing a positive perception and behaviour of the children once they actually feel lower than other people, and it also increases children's self-esteem, as well as increasing positive participation between children and those they need to live with in and out of residential care, which ultimately fulfils their life.

Besides that, previous research (Pears et al., 2012; Greeson et al., 2015; Fuentes-Pelaez et al., 2016; Uyan-Semerci & Erdogan, 2017; Lee et al., 2021) demonstrated that support systems from people around the children at the microsystem level benefitted the children immensely

because they had more implications for building self-esteem, such as empowering interaction from child caregivers, officers, or friends at school or community related to the children. As a result, it is suggested that, in order to obtain proper support on a microsystem level, people in the community and those directly involved with the children should be more concerned about the sensitive issue of the children's feelings of stigma, as the current study discovered that children placed in government residential care feel lower status than other people. Bullying from school friends is still prevalent in society, making children feel inferior to their peers and reducing their ability to succeed in school. Many of them are also losing confidence in living outside of residential care. In particular, recent research indicates that children in residential care are losing confidence in living as a result of their perception that they are different from persons outside of residential care. Since they no longer live with their bi-parents and have been committed in residential care, they fear stigmatisation if it becomes recognized that they are in government residential care.

Furthermore, once residential care is considered a "last alternative" for children who cannot live with a family. This conveys the message to society that only children with problem live in residential care, which may lower the children's self-esteem and confidence in their potential to function in society. (Rich, 2009). Based on these results, more effort should be put into understanding society to enhance the image and stigma of children in government residential care.

Nonetheless, family support is one of the factors that influence the advancement and wellbeing of children. Several more issues in the family system were associated to children's wellbeing, including parental love and care, parental pressure on children's desires, and the issue of trust between family members. In the absence of all of this assistance, the shift to developing excellent child wellbeing would be negatively impacted (Uyan-Semerci & Erdogan, 2017). Therefore, the results also advocate family support as the one source with the greatest influence on enhancing the long-term wellbeing of children, since after a short period in residential care, children should leave and the majority either return to their own families or need family support. As a result, children's families should be able to actively promote positive growth and provide powerful emotional support to children in the long run for better living and accomplishment as productive adults.

To add to it, even though the formal support system provides the facilities or actual plan that can be reached for the basic life needs of the children, it is clear that only the formal support system cannot encompass all the needs of the children. So study recommendations to provide greater informal support to the children since children in government residential care may benefit from increased soft power by figuring out how to properly utilise informal sources of support on the microsystem level, such as greater support from family, friends, child caregivers, officers, and those directly involved with the children.

Conclusion

In this respect, the findings of the study indicated that children still need a sense of care from family, child caregivers, officers, friends, and other individuals in their life, as well as greater understanding from people in society who do not perceive them as different and inferior to others. In addition, the child needs more self-esteem fulfilment to be able to confidently exist in a society, seeing as people and the society outside of residential care have a significant impact on their self-esteem, such as by building or destroying their confidence once they are living outside residential care.

Moreover, once residential care is the primary option for children, they are regarded incapable of living in a family environment and are thus seen as a last resort. This would be damaging since it sends a negative message to society that only "poor" or "weak" children remain in residential care, which may contribute to the children's poor self-esteem and lack of confidence in their capacity to function in society (Rich, 2009). In order to decrease the negative image and stigma associated with children living in government residential care, there should be more attention paid to better understanding people in society to reduce the negative image and stigma attached to children who live in government residential care.

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