

Addressing the Challenges of Street Children Rehabilitation: Insights from Starehe Sub-County, Nairobi

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Abstract

In Nairobi City County, which is the capital city of the Republic of Kenya, there is a major crisis involving street children. Indeed, the number of homeless underage persons in the city is about 70,000, and about 10,000 of them live in Starehe Sub-County. The research is focused on the rehabilitation efforts being made in Starehe. Many of the street children in Starehe have never been taken through various rehabilitation programs, but they ended-up relapsing. In that case, it is apparent that the root-causes of the problem were never addressed in an effective manner. Specifically, these children seem to have no social-emotional skills which would enable them to avoid the life in the streets. They lack self-awareness, social-awareness, self-management skills, have no relationship skills, and are unable to make responsible decisions. The primary study was a narrative inquiry that involved eight respondents. The approach was taken because it is effective when the research is qualitative. The data elicited from the respondents were complimented with the that elicited from primary sources and from rehabilitation centers. The study made some findings. The study therefore concludes that the high rate of relapse is caused by the failure of a majority of the rehabilitation centers in Starehe Sub-County to utilize research-based approaches while assisting their clients. The application of relevant theories and research-based approaches would help these facilities achieve a much higher rate of success. Such a strategy would help come-up with tailored interventions which address the specific needs of the street children, and also offer guidance and a sense of direction while helping the individuals. Therefore, it is important for the rehabilitation centers in Starehe Sub-County to reevaluate their operational methodologies.

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1. Introduction

There is a major problem of street children in Kenya, and most of these individuals are found loitering along the streets of such major cities as Nairobi, Mombasa, Kisumu, and Eldoret (Pkaremba, Oleche, & Owiti, 2023). At the moment, there are over 300,000 street children in the country, and about 70,000 of them are in the capital City of Nairobi. In Starehe Sub-County alone, it is estimated that around 10,000 underage individuals are living in the streets (Ongowo, Ngetich, & Murenga, 2021). These statistics suggest that the issue ought to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

Starehe Sub-County is home to a high number of rehabilitation centers for street children. Indeed, a majority of those found loitering in the streets have ever been taken through one or more programs with the aim of helping them to recover and to start thriving in life. Unfortunately, these efforts have failed (Ongowo, Ngetich, & Murenga, 2023). Weatherill, Corcoran, & Ng (2023) argue that the failure is due to the fact that the stakeholders are implementing the wrong solutions. In essence, there is a rush to solve the problem without really understanding the root-causes, or even coming up with formulas which are evidence-based. There are several theoretical frameworks which ought to guide the effort to rehabilitate the street children in Starehe Sub-County. The most important ones are those addressing individuals' social-emotional development (Iminza & Kimaru, 2023). Sitienei & Pillay (2018) argue that of all the areas which are targeted during rehabilitation, the endeavor to improve the clients' social and emotional wellbeing is the most critical. This is because once the individual acquires social emotional skills, improving in other areas becomes relatively easy.

2. Review of Related Literature

According to Ravazzini et al. (2023), individuals with superior social emotional skills are far more likely to be successfully rehabilitated than their counterparts who lack these abilities. The skills in question include self-awareness, social-awareness, and self-management. Others are relationship skills and the ability to make decisions responsibly. Individuals with these skills are able to regulate their emotions, thought patterns, and behaviors. The fact that they are rarely hurt and frustrated makes it unlikely that they would make rushed and irrational decisions. As a consequence, equipping a child with social-emotional skills can help avert a scenario where they keep on relapsing and opting to leave in the streets (Zenebe et al., 2023).

Deficiencies Identified in Children Living in the Streets

Two of the most successful organizations which deal with street children within Starehe Sub-County are the Rescue Dada Centre (which is specifically meant for girls living in the streets) and Alfajiri Street Kids Art. Stakeholders from the two non-governmental organizations have identified a couple of areas where children loitering in the streets of Nairobi happen to be deficient (Teresia, 2023). A majority of these areas are closely related to social emotional skills. In essence, a significant number of children in Starehe Sub-County go to the streets and tend to relapse upon going through rehabilitation programs because skills like self-awareness, social-awareness, and self-management are hardly ever instilled into them (Arabbadvi et al., 2023; Goodman et al., 2023). Indeed, these are the root-causes of the challenge of homelessness in Nairobi. They are the issues which should be focused upon by the various rehabilitation centers in Starehe Sub-County in order to realize a much higher success rate than is the case at the moment.

Influence of Lack of Self-Awareness on the Tendency to Become a Street Child

Self-awareness refers to an individual's ability to understand themselves as well as how their actions, emotions, and thoughts align or fail to align with the standards they believe in. Those who are highly self-aware tend to evaluate themselves objectively, manage their emotions, and align their behaviors with the values they hold dear (Kiguru, 2022). In essence, there is no mismatch between what a self-aware individual believes in, and the kind of choices they are making. According to Hansen (2021), self-aware individuals do also comprehend how they are perceived by other individuals. Therefore, equipping children with this ability can help them to stop spiraling into emotional interpretations of the circumstances they find themselves in. Rather than dwelling on the painful experiences, Ongowo (2022) argues that such children can remain focused on the future they desire and hence have what it takes to rehabilitate successfully.

Effect of the Lack of Social-Awareness in Children Predisposed to Become Street Children

Social awareness refers to someone's ability to consider life from the perspective of another person, and hence empathize with their situation (Arabbadvi et al., 2023). Embleton et al. (2020) argue that families are usually left devastated when one or more of their children start to loiter in the streets. If a child has some form of social-awareness, they can empathize with their parents, siblings, and grandparents and possibly decide against making choices which could hurt their kin. According to Burkholder (2020), empathy can be subdivided into two major categories, and these are emotional and cognitive empathy. Cognitive empathy is the capacity to imagine and recognize the other person's thoughts, as well as to understand their feelings. This ability can enable an individual to relay their messages in ways which are most acceptable to others. On its part, emotional empathy is where one has the skills to react to a certain emotion in an effective manner. It is the skill that enables someone to build and nurture strong connections with others (Corcoran et al., 2020).

Effect of Inadequate Self-Management on the Rehabilitation of a Street Child

Self-management is the ability to regulate one's own emotions, thoughts, as well as behaviors such that they enable him to live a productive and fulfilling life. Corcoran et al. (2020) argue that upon being helped to acquire self-management, children tend to have what it takes to adapt to any challenges they encounter. They do also become patient, and hence have the ability to reinforce their relationships with other people. Lack of self-management has been deemed to be one of the factors which cause people to become stressed, and fail to regulate their emotions (Beattie et al., 2023).

The levels of self-management that children need to have been far lower than what would be expected of an adult. Nonetheless, complete lack of this ability makes a child prone to giving up on people, and they feel compelled to seek refuge away from their homes (Burkholder, 2020). Besides, an individual's character is molded when they are still in their childhood. Therefore, self-management trait may never emerge if it is not already there when one is young (Ferguson, 2020).

Impact of the Lack of Relationship Skills on the Rehabilitation of Street Children

Iminza & Kimaru (2023) define relationship skills as the ability to establish and nurture healthy as well as rewarding interactions with a broad range of people. In order to do that, one ought to be fun, spontaneous, exciting to be with, passionate, as well as be ready to devote themselves to

others. Underlying these readily apparent attributes are virtues such as humility, attentive and active listening, self-advocating (also called self-assertiveness), as well as the ability to respect and trust friendships (Burkholder, 2020). According to Pkaremba et al. (2023), relationships between individuals succeed or fail based on their level of communication, the ability to commit, and the willingness to compromise. In that case, the strength of the relationship between a child and his parent, or between siblings, will often depend on the content, manner, and level of communication they have. Commitment entails treating one another with respect, and this must be the case even when one is upset. Hansen (2021) argues that commitment is often assessed based on the behavior one has portrayed in the past. In that case, therefore, a child must be helped to understand that their kin may not always trust their intentions. Restoring trust may take time, but it is still worthwhile to remain optimistic (Beattie et al., 2023). The last aspect is about the willingness and readiness to compromise. Compromising is about finding the middle ground, especially when two parties are engaged in a conflict. This conflict can be about the choices people make, their habits, or even preferences (Beattie et al., 2023). Individuals rarely agree on anything, and hence various forms of conflict are bound to emerge. This is true in any relationship, and also in the relationship between a child and their kin. Some of the children ended-up living in the streets because they could not compromise (Sitienei & Pillay, 2018). Influence of the Inability to Make Responsible Decisions on the Rehabilitation of a Street Child Responsible decision making involves having curiosity and being open-minded. It is also about being honest, having integrity, and being fair. Those who have this quality are also in a position to make reasoned judgements upon analyzing facts, data, and all the information of interest. The extent to which one makes decisions responsibly is dependent on factors such as age (Burkholder, 2020). Young children could make decisions which may appear to be immature to an older person. Nonetheless, there must always be clear progress towards becoming reasonable. If this is not the case, an individual may fail to grow and develop with the kind of level-headedness that would enable them to remain at home rather than start living in the streets (Goodman et al., 2023; Weatherill et al., 2023).

2.1 Theoretical Framework

There are a number of theories which address the root-causes of the lack of social emotional skills. The one that applies to the case of street children in Starehe Sub-County is Behaviorism. It holds that individuals learn behaviors via a process referred to as conditioning (Kiguru, 2022). In essence, a child living in the streets of Starehe Sub-County of Nairobi must have been negatively conditioned in one way or the other. Social workers in such organizations as Rescue Dada Centre and Alfajiri Street Kids Art can utilize the conditioning techniques of Behaviorism in a bid to help the street children learn the social-emotional skills they are lacking at the moment. In so doing, these children would subsequently have what it takes to modify their undesirable behaviors. Ravazzini et al. (2023) argue that Behaviorism is usually utilized hand-in-hand with a variety of cognitive components. Nonetheless, the use of these components is determined by the specific needs of a client. It is also worth noting that if a case is deemed to be complicated and in need of specialized care, the stakeholders of Rescue Dada Centre and Alfajiri Street Kids refers the child to more qualified professionals.

In order to enhance its effectiveness, Behaviorism is used together with Social Learning Theory. Social Learning Theory is meant to avail a framework for understanding the client's needs precisely before the intervention is attempted through behaviorism (Ferguson, 2020). A social worker starts by learning how a child's past experiences have influenced their current behavior (Ravazzini et al., 2023). They then proceed to come-up with research-based and targeted solution to the problem at hand.

Social Learning Theory as Used in the Rehabilitation of Street Children

Social Learning Theory is based on the experiments conducted by a psychologist called Albert Bandura in the 1960s. Bandura managed to prove that children can learn by mere observation. He asserted that children copy the bad behavior they observe from the adults in their lives. He also noted that boys were at least three times more likely to copy the said behavior than girls (Arabbadvi et al., 2023; Kiguru, 2022). The third observation is that copying is more likely if the initial actor is a man as opposed to being a female. Bandura ultimately concluded that children imitate others irrespective of where they have observed the behavior. According to the Social Learning Theory, children tend to copy bad habits a lot faster than they copy the good ones (Embleton et al., 2020). Another observation that Albert Bandura made is that punishment for bad behavior is more impactful than rewarding the children for the good ones. A similar observation has been made by various social learning theorists during their endeavors to come-up with the most appropriate approach for conditioning (Teresia, 2023). Nonetheless, punishment does not necessarily need to involve the inflicting of pain of any kind. Indeed, it can be in form of withdrawing something that a child values, or the denial of favors which they typically get (Ongowo et al., 2021). According to Ongowo et al. (2023), making that knowledge part of the foundation for the strategies used in the rehabilitation of street children has the potential to result into a high rate of success.

3. Methodology

The primary research is completed using narrative inquiry. This is a qualitative research approach that makes use of life histories, stories, and interviews in a bid to explore as well as conceptualize individual experiences and worldviews in an in-depth fashion (Weatherill et al., 2023). The researcher was hoping to uncover the meanings the street children assign to their past experiences, and how those meanings influenced their subsequent behavior. This is done in tandem with the assessment of their social emotional skills. The essence of doing so is to determine if having social emotional skills can help individuals make beneficial choices irrespective of the nature of the experiences they have endured.

Data Collection Method

A sample of eight respondents was used in this study. This was appropriate because Ongowo (2022) recommends the size of representatives in narrative research to be between six and ten subjects. The idea is not to gather data from a huge number of people, but to focus on collecting in-depth data. Three data collection procedures were used. Records of their histories and stories about the respondents were sourced from Rescue Dada Centre and Alfajiri Street Kids. The respondents were subsequently interviewed to clarify some details as well as to supplement the pieces of data gathered from their stories and life histories. Interviews also helped understand their future plans. Exploring the past, present, and the future concurrently was important because it helps reveal if there are changes in their perspectives, and how those changes can influence their future decisions and behaviors.

Data Analysis Method

Thematic analysis was used, and this involves reading through the data and identifying patterns (Weatherill et al., 2023). The next step was to develop themes and these patterns. Themes are the features of the respondents' accounts which characterize their common experiences and perceptions. Therefore, a theme is an adequate basis for explaining why something happens, or why a particular event is likely in the future (Ongowo, 2022). While completing the study, thematic analysis facilitated the understanding of why the rate of relapse is high, as well as factors which are likely to perpetuate the current trend.

4. Data Analysis and Discussion

The results showed that to a large extent, street children living in Starehe Sub-County lack the ability to control their feelings. As a consequence, they do not have the kind of social skills which would enable them to make and keep friends.

Lack of Self-Awareness Among the Street Children Living in Starehe Sub-County

It is estimated that about 75 per cent of the street children represented in the sample lack self-awareness. In essence, they do not have the conscious knowledge of their own feelings and character. As a consequence, there is the tendency to be overconfident, have relatively poor judgement, and are also unable to learn from their past mistakes. This is why they make the kind of choices which an individual with self-awareness would most probably avoid (Ongowo, 2022).

Other challenges include having low self-esteem, the failure to see how their behavioral and thinking patterns are creating problems, and difficulty in accepting responsibilities. Instead of owning-up, they tend to shift the blame or even deny that something actually happened. As a consequence, it is difficult for them to embrace changes which would improve their lives (Corcoran et al., 2020). Moreover, it becomes difficult to benefit from any kind of help that is being rendered by the professionals. Psychologically, it is evident that the street children have the tendency to suppress uncomfortable emotions, rather than dealing with them. Moreover, they shift their self-perception, and this makes it impossible for them to evaluate their actions, thoughts, and feelings (Ferguson, 2020). They are overprotective of themselves, and this underscores the fact that they are not ready to learn and improve. Kiguru (2022) argues that many of these problems would be mitigated if the street children are able to see themselves from the perspectives of other people. Indeed, they would be in a position to socialize and get feedback from others. Those who are old enough can be introduced to the idea of maintaining a self-discovery journal. With time, it would be possible for them to self-discover as well as track the triggers of negative as well as positive emotions. With that information, they would mitigate the negative feelings and start building their character.

Lack of Social-Awareness in Children Predisposed to Become Street Children

Over 70 per cent of the street children who were sampled lacked social awareness; and this means that they are unable to take into account the perspectives, feelings, and needs of other people. This is despite the fact that social awareness is an indispensable skill if one is to succeed personally and professionally. The main reason why an overwhelming majority of the street children lack social skills is because they have not been prepared to think about other people (Ravazzini et al., 2023). While interacting with them, it was clear that they only think about themselves and what they perceive to be their personal needs. It has been revealed that the street children living in Starehe Sub-County have difficulties when reading social cues. It is apparent that most of them are unable to tell when someone feels uncomfortable. In many other instances, they tend to say one thing while meaning another. Irrespective of the particular characteristics one exhibit, absence of social awareness is the root-cause of a majority of the interpersonal conflicts involving the individuals who ultimately become street children (Iminza & Kimaru, 2023). They experience hardships while trying to forge relationships, and cannot hold conversations with people who are supposed to be part of their support networks. According to Beattie et al. (2023), social awareness is a skill, and it can be learned. Once the skill is perfected, it becomes possible to avoid saying or doing things which could be offensive to other people. The rehabilitation centers in Starehe Sub-County of Nairobi ought to equip their clients with the tactics they need to start paying close attention to the social cues exhibited by those around them. Once they become socially aware, they will feel more comfortable being around people in their social networks, and it will also present opportunities for the social networks to support children who would otherwise become stuck in the streets. In essence, therefore, social awareness is mutually beneficial.

Effect of Inadequate Self-Management on the Rehabilitation of a Street Child

Self-management refers to the act of taking responsibility of personal well-being and behavior. Individuals with self-management skills tend to be reliable members of their own group. Lacking such skills makes one unpredictable, and hence other people may resolve to avoid him or her

(Zenebe et al., 2023). Over 80 per cent of the street children sampled had the tendency to snap and say hurtful things to those around them. Their emotions seemed to be quite intense; and when they were not expressing those emotions, they seemed to be deep in thoughts. Besides unreliability, there are four indicators which showed that the street children lacked self-management skills. They included being untrustworthy, inability to adapt, inattentiveness, and procrastination. With regard to untrustworthiness, the study showed that they lack consistent codes of ethics. They do not always stick to their values, and hence other people are unlikely to trust them. On adaptability, they are prone to feeling uncomfortable in case the situations they find themselves in change. It becomes quite difficult to embrace the trend and to find out a way of coping with it. This is a major challenge because change is constant, and hence the inability to cope is always stressful to all parties involved (Zenebe et al., 2023). An overwhelming majority of the street children sampled showed difficulties holding attention, or even listening when spoken to. Inattentiveness was apparent in playful activities as well, and this is largely because they hardly ever follow instructions. Another problem was that they had challenges organizing activities and tasks, and they seemed to dislike as well as avoid any activity that called for mental effort. This was particular the case if completing the said activity necessitated a significantly long duration of time (Teresia, 2023).

The last of the major signs was procrastination, and it was noted that the street children always employed delay tactics. They hardly seemed to be in a hurry to complete any activity, even when a deadline was imposed. Their procrastination is coupled with the fact that they are easily distracted, and are also forgetful. In that case, they may never complete the activities they postpone (Iminza & Kimaru, 2023).

Lack of Relationship Skills and the Rehabilitation of Street Children

There are three key relationship skills which about 90 per cent of the sampled street kids seemed to lack. They are unable to listen attentively, communicate effectively, as well as self-advocate. As a consequence, they are unable to develop and nurture productive and mutually healthy relationships. The frustrations make them unable to either trust or respect, and they feel that other people do not respect them as well (Sitienei & Pillay, 2018). In a way, therefore, they feel justified to distrust and disrespect those who are supposed to be in their support networks.

Due to their poor listening skills, it became apparent that the street children represented in the sample tended to make a lot of assumptions because they hardly understood what anyone said. As a consequence, they made avoidable errors and were ineffective in decision making. This is why the end-results is such costly mistakes as the decision to live in the streets rather than remain at home.

Poor communication between the individuals represented in the sample and their social support networks has resulted into escalation of tensions. Zenebe et al. (2023) argue that understanding of the self and processing of one's emotions are the bases of effective communication. Because the street children lack these traits, they are unable to reflect on their life, decisions, actions, beliefs, thought patterns, and even relationships. There is a high rate of relapse because of the disconnect between the goals being sought by the rehabilitation centers in Starehe Sub-County and the measures being taken to accomplish them. Nonetheless, one organization called Alfajiri Street Kids Art has mastered the concept of encouraging the children's creativity through art and playful

activities. The stakeholders of Alfajiri appreciate that art boosts the children's thinking processes and imagination, and ultimately enhance their self-expression (Goodman et al., 2023). If this idea was embraced by all the other stakeholders dealing with street children in Starehe Sub-County, their relationship skills would be refined in a way that enables them to establish and maintain a good rapport with those around them.

Street Children's Inability to Make Responsible Decisions

All the individuals selected in the sample seemed to be prone to engaging in the kind of behaviors which expose themselves as well as others to harm. They tend to make choices impulsively, and hence keep on repeating the same mistakes. Another observation is that their main focus is on short-term gains, which many do not even realize regardless. This happens because they have challenges delaying gratification. Moreover, they are vulnerable to peer pressure, and hardly ever anticipate that their choices will have consequences (Embleton et al., 2020).

Because they make decisions on impulse, hardly ever delay gratification, and ignore the consequences of the choices they make, the street children living in Starehe Sub-County are unable to optimize on their potential. It is worth appreciating that decision-making impact on the way people spend their time, the information they choose to ignore or accept, and the relationships they settle for. If the decisions are irresponsible, they are likely to settle for the wrong information, waste their time on meaningless activities, and succumb to peer pressure (Ongowo et al., 2023; Pkaremba et al., 2023).

Upon interacting with them at a deeper level, it became apparent that there are a couple of reasons why the street children never learned how to make responsible decisions. About 90 per cent of them asserted that their parents or caregivers never allowed them the opportunity to voice their opinions. They argued that they felt as if they were never part of the decisions made in their homes. The fact that other people failed to show faith in their abilities ended-up demoralizing and demotivating them. A majority believed that they could have learned if they were given an opportunity and if they were adequately supported.

Conclusion

Due to the fact that social learning theory is largely overlooked, rehabilitation centers in Starehe Sub-County are unable to benefit from such learning principles as observation, attention, and retention. These centers are also incapable of reproducing positive traits, and even motivate their clients to learn in an effective manner. The social learning theory is based on the view that the environment impacts on the way people develop and act. In that case, an intervention can only be successful if it is coupled with the change of the environment such that the clients are only exposed to the traits they ought to embrace (Hansen, 2021). Indeed, it is lack of such a theoretical framework that is deemed to be causing the high rate of relapse among the street children who have already gone through rehabilitation programs (Corcoran et al., 2020).

If rehabilitation centers in Starehe Sub-County incorporate social learning theory and behaviorism in an effective manner, their clients would become increasingly self-aware. They would also become social-aware, and acquire adequate self-management skills. Moreover, their relationship skills would improve, and so would be the case with their decision-making abilities (Ravazzini et al., 2023). As a consequence, the rate of successful rehabilitation would be enhanced as that of recidivism decreases. In essence, therefore, the rehabilitation centers need to revise the approaches they use while assisting street children. All their approaches ought to be anchored on research findings as this would mitigate the risk of making decisions on the basis of assumptions and personal biases. Indeed, the use of research-based strategies would improve the success-rate, and hence help in keeping children off the streets.

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