

Experiences of Social Workers in Facilitating the Reunification Process of Street Connected Children in Mwanza City, Tanzania

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ABSTRACT:

This study recons social workers experiences in facilitating reunification process of street connected children at Railway Children Africa in Mwanza, Tanzania. The study employs qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the participation of social work professionals in reuniting street children with their families. The study is grounded in attachment theory, which posits that the bond between children and caregivers is crucial for emotional and psychological development. This theoretical framework highlights the importance of fostering secure attachments to enable effective reintegration, emphasizing the role of social workers in providing the necessary emotional support and stability for street-connected children during the reunification process. Data were collected using in-depth interview from a sample of fourteen participants with long experience in re-integration process. The findings have reveals that social workers play a critical role in reintegration acting as mediators, facilitators, and enablers, skilled in handling traumatized children. They also serve as communication agents and counselors between children and their caregivers in addressing the emotional and systemic challenges that arise before, during and after reunification. The study underscores the necessity to enhance support system and training for social workers to improve the sustainability of reunification efforts.

Key words: reunification, street connected children, social worker, Tanzania and Railway Children Africa.

1. INTRODUCTION

The role of social workers in the reunification process of street children is critical in ensuring the success of reunification into family environment. The process of reunifying street-connected children with their families is a complex undertaking that requires the efforts of various stakeholders, particularly social workers. In Mwanza, where street connected children face numerous socioeconomic challenges, social workers at Railway Children Africa (RCA) play a crucial role in ensuring their survival as well as facilitating the process of re-integrating them with their families. Their responsibilities encompass a wide range of activities that help to create a supportive environment for effectiveness of reunification.

The reunification of street connected children goes beyond the physically return of children to their families to involve a process that requires careful planning, emotional support and ongoing assistance (Carter et al., 2019). While several studies have highlighted the urgent need for intervention to rescue street connected children, the reality on the ground remains challenging. Many children struggle to adapt to home life due to unresolved trauma, economic instability and lack of resources (Mwambene & Sloth-Nielsen, 2010). Furthermore, the existing literature often overlooks the nuanced experiences of these children and their families, leaving a gap in understanding the effectiveness of current intervention (Njuguna et al., 2022).

This study aims to fill this gap by underscoring the importance of social workers' experiences in facilitating reunification process of street connected children at Railway Children Africa (RCA). Given the prevalence of street connected children in low-income and middle-income countries, understanding the dynamics of this issue is crucial for developing effective policies and practices (UNICEF, 2021). The findings not only shed light on the specific context on Mwanza but contribute to global disclosure. While there are many interventions aimed at helping the street connected children, there is often lack of comprehensive understanding regarding their effectiveness. Many children struggle to adapt to home life due to unsolved issues, economic instability as well as lack of resources. This overlooked nuanced experiences of these children and their families create gaps in knowledge about the factors that contribute to successful reunification. This study aims to address these gaps by identify the social workers' experiences.

Statement of the problem

The phenomenon of street-connected children poses significant challenges in urban environments, particularly in Mwanza, Tanzania. These children often face multifaceted socioeconomic issues, including poverty, family breakdown, and exposure to violence, which complicate their reintegration into family settings. While various interventions exist, the effectiveness of these programs remains unclear, as many children struggle to adapt to home life after their return. This inadequacy is underscored by the fact that existing literature frequently overlooks the nuanced experiences of these children, resulting in a gap in understanding how to facilitate successful reunification (Smith & Jones, 2020).

Moreover, social workers are integral in bridging the gap between street-connected children and their families. However, they often encounter systemic barriers such as high caseloads, limited resources, and emotional burnout, which hinder their ability to provide effective support. The lack of institutional backing exacerbates these challenges, leaving social workers to navigate complex emotional landscapes without adequate training or resources (Taylor & Green, 2021). This situation highlights the urgent need for enhanced support systems and training for social workers to improve the sustainability of reintegration efforts, ultimately ensuring a more stable environment for street-connected children.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical underpinnings

In this study attachment theory was used as a foundation in understanding the reunification of street connected children. This theory was developed by John Bowlby in 1969; it posits that the bond formed between children and their caregivers are crucial for the emotional and psychological development (Bowlby, 1969). The study shows how children with disrupted attachments, often due to experiences of neglect or abuse, may struggle with trust and emotional connection when reintegrated with their families. This information reveals the importance of involving social workers in the reintegration of street children. Ainsworth et al. (1978) emphasize that securely attached children are better equipped to cope with challenges.

This theory shows the implications of attachment theory in social work practice. According to Murphy et al. (2014) social workers can understand the emotional issue of street connected children, enabling them to respond with empathy and patience rather than adopting punitive measures. Interventions grounded in attachment theory can include counseling, family therapy, and maintenance of emotional well-being which are vital roles of social worker in addressing both logistics and emotional dimension of reunification.

Empirical review

The role of social workers in reunification process to street connected children is critical, as it shown in various empirical studies for example, Ferguson (2017) emphasizes that social workers act as vital links between children and families, facilitating trust and communication. Their involvement in family counseling and conflict resolution is essential in addressing emotional needs for children and caregivers, ensuring going back into the home environment. Also the study shows that if social workers are adequately trained and supported, they can effectively mediate conflicts and prepare families for reunification.

Moreover, Grossmann et al. (2005) found that social workers play a role in case management, which includes assessing family readiness and coordinating, services to meet the needs of reunified children. Their ability to provide the ongoing support and follow-up is crucial in preventing re-streetism, as children benefit from continuous engagement and monitoring.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study used qualitative research approach employing phenomenological research design to guide the researcher in engaging participants through in-depth interviews, allowing them to narrate their stories in a supportive and non-judgmental environment. These narratives helped to reveal how children internalize the transition from the street to their homes; how families perceive their caregiving roles in post reunification, and how professionals navigate the challenges of facilitating the process.

Purposive sampling was used to determine participants all of whom were social workers. They were selected on the basis of their work experiences, at least three years of work experience with street connected children. The participants came from two sources: Railway Children Africa (RCA), and the Social Welfare Support Desk (SWSD) in Mwanza.

This study used in-depth interview guides as primary research instruments. The choice of this type of instrument was guided by the exploratory nature of the study, which sought to understand the lived experiences and nuanced realities of street-connected children, their caregivers, and key stakeholders involved in their reunification. Audio recording and note taking were used as well to ensure the accuracy and proper handling of the participant's information.

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze and interpret data. The first step required the researchers to familiarize with the data by understanding the content; next, followed the coding process by labeling different categories of ideas; and, the final stage involved defining and naming the themes by providing clear descriptions.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings indicated that social workers' role extended beyond tracing and returning children to their families. They also prepared families emotionally, offered counseling, mediated conflicts, and conducted follow-up to ensure smooth reunification. However, the findings also showed that their work was marred by many challenges including limited resources, heavy caseloads, and the emotional toll of supporting traumatized children.

A key role of social workers was to identify children's families and prepare both sides for reunion. This task often required extreme sensitivity, as families carried mixed emotions of guilt, shame, and sometimes anger. The participants said that:

"Identifying the child becomes easier because after taking them to the shelter, many activities take place, and there are also many other children. As they interact with their peers in the shelter, they may mention something to me, like a specific area. At that point, the shelter supervisor will be attentive to ask other children if someone has said they are from Sengerema. As a social worker, my job is to visit the child and gather information, whether it's new details or the same ones, while continuing the tracing process. I will also involve the shelter supervisor, informing them that the child's information is accurate and that they should continue providing care. However, if there are discrepancies like the child mentioning a school that doesn't match their residence I will ask the supervisor to assist me further. Often, children do not share information without trust, so they need to spend time with you. I also collaborate with the local administrator or the chairperson of the area the child mentioned or the school they attended. Once that is complete, I can then communicate with the parent." (S1)

"After the initial report on the child, as a social worker, you take on the responsibility of tracing the family using the information provided by the child. For example, if you received the child from their home in Kigoma, which is large, you would use the child's details, such as the school or ward they

mentioned. You would then communicate with the social worker in that area, who will connect you with local leaders. After that, you should be able to successfully locate the family". (S2)

"After taking the child to the fit person, I continue to have one-on-one sessions with the child frequently until you have established where the child comes from, for example, a specific ward in Geita. Once you have that information, we start tracing. We do tracing, especially if the child is from a distant area, by communicating with the welfare officer, either the executor or the chairperson. This involves coordination with the community, and the chairperson will engage with their community to identify why this child is coming from a certain area. Additionally, the reason we conduct this tracing is not just for identification but also for assessment purpose". (S3)

This findings supported by (Smith, 2021; Johnson, 2020), show that the sensitivity and ability to build trust are often highlighted as a vital components in successful reunification efforts. Effective family tracing with street connected children usually include comprehensive assessment that take into account the emotional readiness of both the child and family, also this is essential for the smooth transition back to the home environments. Therefore, most of the families with Nyamagana District in Mwanza have successes to take back their children as the social workers efforts to ensure the child connect with their families.

Social workers also acted as counselors, addressing conflicts between children and caregivers and helping them adjust emotionally to reunification. The participants said that:

"When we take a child from the shelter, we advise them. If it's a child who enjoys going home, they will be happy, but if they still don't want to go back home, we need to prepare them by explaining that staying in the streets is not good. We'll tell them that we will help them with this and that, and they will return to school. There needs to be a process to prepare them because if you force them to return, they might run away again. After bringing the child back home, I will provide education to the family as a whole by explaining the dangers of living on the streets and all the challenges children face there." (S1)

"When we arrive at the family, we hold a community meeting. We call it a community forum, which will help build a good relationship between the child and the parents, and for the parents to have a good relationship with the child as well. We discuss any challenges the child has faced in order to support them and prevent a return to those circumstances. This involves educating the family about parenting." (S2)

Hence, the findings shows that counseling was a tool for transforming potentially volatile homecomings into opportunities for healing; and, indicates how conflict resolution skills introduced by social workers fostered parenting in the family in post-reunification. According to attachment theory, children need stable, nurturing relationships to develop secure attachments. Social workers facilitated discussions that addressed emotional barriers and fostered understanding, helping both children and caregivers navigate their feelings, which ultimately supports the formation of healthier attachments.

Further findings show social workers positioning themselves as advocates for children, ensuring that their safety and security are respected during and after reunification. The participants said that:

"The first and foremost thing we ensure is the protection and safety of the child by making sure they are not in any danger that could affect them. In this main role, we look at whether the child has been rescued and sheltered, but we also consider if they have been connected with their family. It's not just about connecting them; we also assess whether their basic needs are being met, such as attending school, receiving food, and other essentials. That is the primary and crucial responsibility." (S1).

"The organization works with street children and collaborates with the government ensure that the children on the streets are safe and protected from violence and anything that could cause harm to them." (S3).

This finding shown the importance of collaboration between NGOs and government entities in safeguarding these vulnerable children. For example, organizations such as Save the Children and UNICEF work alongside Tanzanian governmental bodies to implement child protection frameworks and address issues such as child labor and abuse. However, challenges persist, including inadequate enforcement of existing laws, limited resources, and cultural attitudes that sometimes hinder effective protection. While there are successes in these collaborations that have improved reporting mechanisms for abuse, but systemic issues like poverty and social stigma continue to complicate efforts. The need for comprehensive strategies that engage communities, empower social workers, and strengthen governmental support remains paramount to ensure the safety and health of children in these settings

Social workers also struggle to provide stable and secure place for living- This is important for good health of the children- These shelters also played a crucial role in fostering stability and enabling residents to rebuild their lives as well as protecting from additional problems. Social workers collaborate with organization to identify suitable accommodations. The participants said that:

“After gathering information from the child and determining that they need shelter, we communicate with a fit person, someone from the care facilities. It's important to ensure we have trustworthy individuals. However, we have to consider the child's appearance; if they have been on the streets for a long time, we can't take them directly to the care facility. When we do take them to the facility, we collaborate with various stakeholders who assist us with transportation”. (S2).

“We take the children to places called safe shelters or temporary shelters. These temporary shelters have fit persons, who are trusted individuals identified by local government, either the executor or the chairperson, and they undergo vetting to ensure the accommodations meet the required standards. The temporary shelter refers to a place where you find a child from the streets and take them there after bringing them to the same fit person. And we believe that a child is safe at home or in a specialized shelter”. (S3).

“After listening to the child's needs, you can then determine whether to place them in temporary shelter at a care facility or with a fit person for temporary accommodation. At this point, you will also fill out the necessary admission forms for the temporary shelter”. (S1)

The provision of safe shelter is aligned with attachment theory, which asserts that children need a stable environment to foster secure attachments. Social workers' efforts to ensure children's safety and nurturing space, contribute to their emotional well-being, allowing them to form positive attachments, and facilitating their reintegration into family life. This aligns with Davis (2022), whereby social workers facilitate access to safe accommodation, ensuring that children have a stable environment while transitioning back to their families. This provision is essential for preventing further trauma and promoting a sense of security.

Case management by a social worker involves a systematic process of assessing, planning, implementing, and evaluating services for individuals in needs. Based on this assessment, social workers develop a tailored plan that outlines specific goals and the resources required to achieve them. The participants said that:

“First, we conduct an interview as part of what is called the case management process. The initial step involves identifying the challenge by asking questions such as where the child was, where they come from, how they arrived, what transportation they used, and where they are headed. This is the initial assessment. After this, you will know whether the child has run away, has experienced abuse, left voluntarily, or is being defiant. Then you can decide what to do next”. (S1).

“There are various methods we use. In the initial steps, when a child arrives at the office, they may be brought by a good Samaritan or come from the police. We encounter these children through different channels and collaborate with various stakeholders. Therefore, the first thing we do when the child arrives is to build a relationship with them so they feel comfortable opening up. It's not easy for a child to speak to you if they don't know you. So, initially, we focus on establishing a rapport with the child to become their friend, which allows for open communication. After that, you can inquire about the

challenges that led them to the street. Once the child shares their story, you will determine that they need temporary shelter". (S2)

This highlights the integrative role social workers played in connecting families with services essential to successful reintegration, and advocacy extended beyond the home to institutional and community spaces. This process involves assessing children's needs and developing tailored plans for their reintegration. Building rapport is essential for effective communication and support. The interactions between social workers and children set the tone for successful case management, emphasizing the role of empathy in social work. Also NGOs often collaborate with government social services to implement case management frameworks, but inconsistencies in training and resources can lead to gaps in service delivery.

Social workers' training allowed them to respond effectively to the unique needs of street-connected children. However, they also recognized the limits of their skills. The participants said that:

We received training in counseling and child protection. But sometimes we face very difficult cases that require more specialized professionals." (S1)

This reflects both their competence and awareness of their limitations. Social workers receive training in counseling and child protection, but they recognize the limitations of their skills when dealing with complex cases that require specialized support. In many cases, social workers often feel overwhelmed by cases that exceed their training, highlighting the need for ongoing professional development.

Social workers also highlighted systemic challenges such as inadequate resources and large caseloads. The participants said that:

"We often have more families than we can manage. We need more support to follow up on each child properly." (S2).

"Indeed, the challenge is the presence of many children and very few homes, because every day there are more children, and remember, there aren't many reliable places to accommodate them, so this is a significant challenge." (S1)

Hence, quote reflects how under-resourcing limited the depth of follow-up and support for reunification which hindered social workers to ensure children's safety. However, NGOs often supplement government resources but face their own funding challenges during reunification process, that impact their capacity to support social workers effectively. The daily operations revealed the strain on social workers, who often juggle numerous cases, underscoring the urgent need for improved funding and resource allocation.

Sustaining long-term support for vulnerable children presents significant challenges, particularly in resource-limited settings. Social workers often faced the harsh reality of insufficient funding, which hampered their ability to monitor each child effectively over time. The participants said that:

"The challenge is that we do not have enough resources to keep monitoring each child for a long time. Some children disappear again. Because the government has not allocated a sufficient budget for issues like this, we are collaborating closely with stakeholders such as RCA." (S1).

"Indeed, we as an organization cannot fully meet the needs of these children; our small resources are quite limited. Therefore, we work closely with RCA on this significant task." (S2)

The obstacles in providing sustained support highlight the urgent need for increased governmental funding and resource allocation. Without a concerted effort to address these financial constraints, the effectiveness of child monitoring programs will remain compromised. Collaborations with NGOs and other stakeholders can provide temporary solutions, but they are not substitutes for systemic change. Long-term support requires a robust framework that prioritizes children's welfare. Also, investing in these resources is essential for breaking the cycle of vulnerability and ensuring that every child receives the support they need.

Follow-up was described as essential to sustaining reunification. Social workers ensured that they communicated with the families to monitor the development of the child as well as to make sure if the child has accomplished his or her responsibilities such as schooling or training. The participants said that:

"Yes! After connecting the child, we focus on the formal system to determine if the child is attending school, which allows us to receive good feedback. Communication can be direct with the local welfare officer assigned to that family, and sometimes, due to the bond established with the family, they provide cooperation. Every three months, we visit the family because the child's case is not closed, as the child may return to the streets again". (S1).

"Yes, there is a formal monitoring system, like the service plan form I mentioned. This service plan is divided into one-month, three-month, and six-month periods, which track the family's situation and the child's overall development". (S2)

"There is something called close follow-up for those who are within Mwanza, where they are visited every week. This depends on the case; for sensitive cases, such as those involving sexual abuse or if a parent is an alcoholic, they are visited weekly. However, for cases that are not sensitive, we visit at least twice a month, and for those that are very ordinary, the child is visited at least once". (S4)

Hence, this highlights how follow-up ensured accountability and allowed for early interventions. NGOs often partner with local authorities to establish follow-up mechanisms, but insufficient staffing can limit the frequency and quality of these visits. Regular follow-up and communication with families are essential for sustaining reunification this facilitates social workers to monitor children's progress to ensure accountability and early intervention when necessary. This supported by Patel (2021), whereby the continuous engagement through home visit is very essential for successful reintegration and ongoing follow-up allows social workers to monitor the adjustment of children and families, it providing timely interventions when necessary. This proactive approach is critical for addressing potential issues early on, ensuring a smoother transition.

Social workers also cooperate with local leaders, who often help social workers in the process of reunification. The participants said that:

"We involve teachers and local leaders to ensure the child is supported not only at home but also in school and in the community." (S2).

"We are working hard to cooperate with local leaders to ensure that information about the child is available, making it easier for the child to meet their family and reunite. It also makes it easier for the family to find the child through the local leaders". (S4).

"Yes, we also ensure that, for example, there was a case I handled involving a seventh-grade child. During the preparations to reunite them with their family, they were about to take their final exams. I really fought to make sure they returned in time to sit for the exams, and I went to speak directly with the head teacher". (S1)

Hence, multi-level collaborations are essential for long-term success of the reunification of street children. Collaboration with schools and local leaders is crucial for supporting children's development after reunification. Social workers engage with stakeholders in facilitating reintegration and monitor progress as well as the effective coordination with local stakeholders is vital for long-term success, although systemic inefficiencies can obstruct these collaborative efforts. This supported by Harris (2022), underscores the importance of multi-level collaboration in providing comprehensive support for families during reunification process. This coordination helps to create a stable support network that enhances the reintegration experience for child.

5. CONCLUSION

This study highlight that social workers play a crucial role in reunification process of street connected children in Mwanza, Tanzania. Their responsibilities included mediation, and facilitation. The findings reveal that social workers in Nyamangana District are the backbone of the reunification process. They traced families, prepared them emotionally, mediated conflicts, and advocated for children's rights. Their counseling and conflict-resolution skills restored communication between children and caregivers, while follow-up visits created

accountability. Yet, their work was often carried out under difficult conditions of emotional strain, high caseloads, and limited resources.

In social terms, social workers' voices reflect both passion and exhaustion. They expressed pride in reconnecting children with their families, but also a longing for more institutional support to sustain their work. Their stories highlight that reunification is not simply a private family affair it is a structured process that depends heavily on the professional commitment of social workers. Without their presence as mediators, counselors, and advocates, many children in Nyamangana would find reintegration impossible.

However, the study also show the challenges faced by social workers such as caseload, limited resources and emotional burnout. These obstacles emphasize that there is need to enhance organizational support and training to improve the sustainability of reunification efforts.

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How to cite/reference this article: [Janeth S. Nolascus](#), [Paskas Wagana](#), [Johnson Mavole](#), Experiences of Social Workers in Facilitating the Reunification Process of Street Connected Children in Mwanza City, Tanzania, *Asian. Jour. Social. Scie. Mgmt. Tech.* 2025; 7(6): 30-38.