Beyond the Walls: Systemic Barriers to Education in Institutional Care and the Role of Social Work

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Abstract

Children living in institutional care often encounter deep-rooted structural, systemic, and psychosocial barriers that restrict their access to meaningful and equitable education. While institutional care is intended to provide safety and stability for vulnerable children, it frequently prioritizes routine and physical needs over emotional development and individualized learning. This study examines the multifaceted challenges that shape the educational experiences of institutionalized children and analyzes the transformative role of social work in addressing these inequities. Using a qualitative exploratory-descriptive design, data were collected from caregivers, social workers, educators, and administrators across child-care institutions and NGOs. Thematic analysis revealed four dominant barriers: institutional rigidity, inadequate resources, stigma and social exclusion, and emotional neglect. These factors collectively impede academic engagement, motivation, and long-term development. Findings show that social workers play a pivotal role in bridging systemic gaps through rights-based advocacy, psychosocial support, educational planning, and interprofessional collaboration. The study underscores the urgency of shifting from custodial models of care toward holistic, child-centered, and inclusive educational strategies that affirm every child's right to quality learning. Strengthening social work practice and structural reforms is essential for transforming institutional care into a setting that promotes empowerment, social justice, and equitable educational outcomes.

Keywords: Institutional care, educational barriers, social work practice, child rights

Introduction

Education is widely recognized as a fundamental right and a cornerstone for human development, empowerment, and social inclusion (UNICEF, 2021). However, for children residing in institutional care settings, this right often remains

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unrealized due to entrenched systemic, structural, and psychosocial barriers. Institutional care, historically established as a protective response to child neglect, abuse, or abandonment, frequently operates within frameworks that prioritize basic survival and safety over emotional and educational enrichment (Smith & Rogers, 2019). As a result, the educational trajectories of children in such environments are shaped not merely by individual capacities but by the institutional and policy contexts that define their daily lives. Research consistently indicates that children in institutional care exhibit lower academic achievement, reduced motivation, and poorer social integration compared to their peers in family-based settings (Browne, 2017; Delap, 2020). Contributing factors include inadequate teacher training, rigid institutional routines, stigma, and lack of individualized educational planning (Johnson et al., 2018).

These systemic constraints reflect a deeper inequity—one where educational access becomes conditional upon structural privilege rather than a universal right. From a critical social work perspective, such inequities are not accidental but rooted in broader socio-political structures that perpetuate exclusion and marginalization (Dominelli, 2010). Social workers, therefore, occupy a pivotal position in challenging these structural injustices by advocating for inclusive policies, mobilizing resources, and fostering environments that support emotional wellbeing alongside academic growth (Garrett, 2022). By integrating educational rights with psychosocial care, social work practice transcends the boundaries of custodial care and redefines institutional spaces as sites of empowerment and transformation.

This paper critically examines the systemic barriers that hinder educational access for children in institutional care and explores the role of social work in dismantling these barriers. Through a critical lens, it emphasizes the need for structural reform, rights-based advocacy, and inter professional collaboration to ensure that education within institutional care evolves beyond its traditional confines—toward a holistic, empowering, and equitable model of learning.

Review of the Literature

The intersection of institutional care and educational exclusion has been extensively documented across social work and child welfare scholarship. Studies reveal that institutional environments often prioritize physical care and discipline over intellectual stimulation and individualized learning, resulting in long-term

cognitive and emotional deficits (Johnson et al., 2018). Browne (2017) underscores that the absence of nurturing relationships and consistent pedagogical engagement within institutions leads to developmental delays and diminished academic motivation. Furthermore, Delap (2020) highlights how bureaucratic structures, resource scarcity, and stigma reinforce systemic neglect of education as a developmental right rather than a privilege.

From a socio-political standpoint, Dominelli (2010) argues that these inequities stem from power imbalances embedded within welfare systems, where institutionalized children become passive recipients of care rather than active participants in their educational journeys. Garrett (2022) advances this argument by asserting that critical social work must transcend case management to advocate for structural reforms in policy and pedagogy. Recent empirical analyses emphasize the transformative potential of social workers as mediators who bridge institutional gaps through rights-based advocacy, community linkage, and trauma-informed educational planning (Smith & Rogers, 2019; UNICEF, 2021). Collectively, the literature situates social work as a pivotal force in reimagining institutional education as inclusive, empowering, and socially just.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative exploratory-descriptive design grounded in a critical social work framework to examine systemic barriers to education in institutional care and the role of social work in promoting inclusion. Data were collected from three child care institutions and two NGOs, involving 15 participants—caregivers, educators, social workers, and administrators—selected through purposive sampling. Using semi-structured interviews and document analysis of institutional and policy records (e.g., Juvenile Justice Act, 2015; National Policy for Children, 2013), the study explored institutional practices, challenges, and interventions. Interviews lasted 45–60 minutes and were supported by field notes to capture contextual insights. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), identifying patterns in structural barriers, pedagogical gaps, and social work strategies. Ethical approval, informed consent, and confidentiality were ensured. The methodology provided a comprehensive understanding of how systemic inequities and social work engagement influence educational outcomes in institutional settings.

Results and Discussions

The findings of this study reveal deep-seated systemic and psychosocial barriers that constrain the educational development of children in institutional care. Data analysis identified four dominant themes: institutional rigidity, inadequate resources, stigma and social exclusion, and emotional neglect. Together, these interrelated factors perpetuate educational disparities and hinder the holistic growth of institutionalized children.

Institutional rigidity emerged as a critical barrier, with participants describing the highly regulated routines and limited autonomy that characterize daily life in institutional settings. Such rigidity, while intended to maintain order and discipline, often limits opportunities for creative expression and individualized learning. Teachers and caregivers noted that structured schedules leave little flexibility for personalized attention or remedial education, leading to disengagement and academic underperformance.

The theme of inadequate resources encompassed the shortage of trained educators, lack of pedagogical materials, and limited infrastructural support. Many institutions rely on volunteers or underqualified staff, resulting in inconsistent teaching quality.

The absence of remedial programs, technology-based learning, and extracurricular opportunities further widens the educational gap between institutionalized children and their peers in mainstream schools.

Stigma was also found to play a pervasive role in shaping the educational experiences of these children. Participants reported that institutional care often carries a social label of "otherness," leading to discrimination both within and outside the learning environment. This social exclusion reinforces feelings of inferiority and low self-esteem among children, diminishing their motivation to learn.

Equally significant was the issue of emotional neglect. Despite meeting basic physical needs, institutional environments frequently fail to provide consistent emotional support and nurturing relationships. The absence of attachment figures and a supportive learning climate affects cognitive engagement, emotional regulation, and academic persistence.

Amid these challenges, social workers emerged as pivotal agents of change. Their role extended beyond traditional case management to encompass advocacy, individualized support, and policy engagement. Social workers facilitated communication between institutions and educational authorities, advocated for inclusive educational policies, and designed individualized educational plans responsive to children's psychosocial needs. Through counselling, mentoring, and family reintegration efforts, they contributed to restoring self-worth and academic motivation among children.

Overall, the findings affirm that educational exclusion in institutional care is not merely a pedagogical issue but a systemic failure rooted in structural inequities. Addressing these barriers requires a collaborative, rights-based approach where social work practice becomes central to transforming institutional education into an empowering, inclusive, and socially just process.

Social Work Implications

- The findings of this study underscore significant implications for social work practice, policy, and advocacy within institutional care settings. Social workers are positioned to act as agents of change, addressing both systemic and individual-level barriers that impede educational access for institutionalized children. By employing a rights-based and child-centered approach, social workers can design and implement individualized educational plans, advocate for inclusive policies, and ensure that pedagogical strategies are responsive to the unique emotional and cognitive needs of each child.
- Social workers also play a critical role in bridging gaps between institutions and external educational resources, facilitating access to remedial programs, extracurricular activities, and community-based learning opportunities. Through counselling and psychosocial support, they help children navigate the emotional challenges associated with institutionalization, thereby enhancing motivation, engagement, and academic persistence.
- At the structural level, social work advocacy is essential in addressing resource inadequacies, promoting teacher training, and challenging institutional rigidity and stigmatization. Collaboration with policymakers, educators, and child welfare authorities ensures that educational reforms are both sustainable and equitable.

- Ultimately, integrating social work into institutional education shifts the focus from mere custodial care to empowerment, social inclusion, and holistic development, reinforcing the principle that every child, irrespective of their institutional status, has a fundamental right to quality education

Conclusion

The study concludes that children in institutional care face profound educational disadvantages shaped by systemic barriers such as institutional rigidity, inadequate resources, stigma, and emotional neglect. These factors collectively undermine learning, self-esteem, and long-term development. Social workers play a crucial transformative role through advocacy, individualized support, and policy engagement, bridging the gap between institutional constraints and children's educational rights. A shift toward a rights-based, child-centered, and inclusive approach is essential to ensure that institutional care moves beyond custodial protection toward empowerment, social justice, and equal educational opportunities for all children.

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