The Impact on Education of Children Admitted into Care after Experiencing Abuse

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Abstract: This study focuses on the impact of abuse on the child's education while it explores how these children are being supported in care institutions to minimize and overcome the effects of abuse on their educational journey.

This paper starts by determining the need for this study, the definition of child abuse and then explores the effects of child abuse on the child's behavioural and psychological well-being. This is supported through different studies where the effects of child abuse on the child's academic level are looked into. Support from the legal aspect is examined as well as the support being given on the management's behalf in children homes.

A qualitative approach was adopted through eight semi-structured interviews with residential social workers and/or heads of care from different children homes. The concept of validity and reliability were examined by referring to the concept of credibility which referred to believability or reasonableness; dependability which referred to the description of the changes that occur during the course of research and an understanding of how such changes affect the study; transferability which referred to the ability to generalize, or the extent to which the results of the research can be applied to other settings or contexts (Trochim 2006: 1); and conformability which referred to the degree to which participants agree or corroborate with the research findings in contrast to the preferences and characteristics of the researcher (Guba Guba's 2018: 197–250).

The thematic analysis of the data concluded that most children in care have a low educational level although a few were not affected in their education. A child's coping mechanisms and resilience play an important role to overcome the effects of abuse. It is important that a holistic support system is provided within the home as well as coordination between the home and educational institutions.

This study concludes that children who have experienced abuse and were admitted in care need to be supported with a care plan which establishes reachable targets to promote a better opportunity for the child to have a positive educational experience. A number of these children choose not to continue tertiary education owing to their urge of becoming independent.

The conclusion looks into the recommendations for more measures to be incorporated, particularly within the educational institution, as well as the need for better holistic support system between the school and the home through a policy which directly supports the education of children in care.

Keywords: Residential care; social worker; management; child abuse; children who experienced abuse; education.

Statistics published in 2016 showed that 207 children are living in residential homes, which is a high number considering Malta's demographics. There is also little understanding of the struggles that children in care deal with on a day-to-day basis in terms of their educational experience (MacGillivray 2010: 92). In fact, although there have been several researches conducted worldwide regarding the effects of child abuse, little research has been conducted on the impact that child abuse may have on the individuals' education.

Literature Review

It is perceived that the future of children who suffered abuse and are admitted in care is ruined. This study adopts the World Health Organization's (WHO) definition of child abuse, namely that Child maltreatment is the abuse and neglect that occurs to children under 18 years of age. It includes all types of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect, negligence and commercial or other exploitation, which results in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development, or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust, or power' (WHO 2018: 1).

Research indicates that all forms of child abuse tend to affect a child's wellbeing through adverse psychological effects. Since abuse is in itself a trauma, some children develop post-traumatic stress disorder (Katz & Barnetz 2014: 40) while others may experience other effects, which range from chronic low self-esteem to severe dissociative states (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2013). Researchers, including Drotar (1992) and Katz and Barnetz (2013: 1033), claim that, while abuse would have harmed the development of attachment and bonding between a child and a parent, this may impact their ability of problem solving, of building social relationships and of coping with new stressful situations (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2013).

On the other hand, when it comes to the behavioural aspect, research indicates that some children may experience withdrawal or avoidance behaviour while others may experience fear, anger and aggression (ibid.). While some children who experience abuse might end up bullying others, as they would feel powerful once they are away from the perpetrator, there are times when the individual might end up becoming a victim of bullying (ibid.).

Research shows that with regards children who have been admitted in care, after experiencing abuse, are at a disadvantage educationally when compared to mainstream students (Abela 2012), including poor academic achievement (Gilbert et al. 2009; Mills 2004; Veltman and Browne 2001: 68–71). Veltman and Browne's meta-analysis (2001: 215) determines that 31 out of 34 studies indicated poor school performance because of abuse and neglect while Wolfe (1999) states that 36 of 42 studies indicated language delays.

These children may also experience a wide range of effects which range from attention problems to learning disorders (ibid.). Several studies have concluded that there is a fair consistency in problematic school performance because these children perform poorly in standardized test scores, gain frequent retention in grade and achieve low grades (Gilbert et al. 2009; Mills 2004; Veltman & Browne 2001: 215).

Veltman and Browne's study correlates to a local study conducted by the Commissioner for Children (2012) that obtained repetitive results regarding the academic profile of 154 participants admitted in care, owing to various reasons, such as neglect. Results show that, irrespective of the type of placement, children in care perform poorly in the three main subjects: English, Maltese and Mathematics (Commissioner for Children 2012: 23–33). In addition, Johnson, Browne and Hamilton-Giachritsis (2006) claim that, apart from performing poorly in the three main subjects, children who have gone through abuse may have language developmental delays along with less spontaneous language and poorer vocabulary.

When it comes to the support which is given from the legal aspect, the Education Act 1991 only refers to how an educational professional should deal with the suspicion of child abuse. It states that one should inform the principal who in turn will inform the child protection services for investigation (Government of Malta, 1991). This is directly stipulated within the Education Act (1988: 26) as: 'It is clearly the duty of the State to ensure that in reference to suspicion or disclosure of child abuse, normal referral procedures shall be referred to (Part IV).'

Eventually this claim abides to the European Convention on Human Rights where, 'Everyone has the right to respect for his private and family life, his home and his correspondence (Article 8).'

The above claims deliver the message that in case of suspicion of child abuse it is important to treat the case with individualization as at this stage there has to be clear examination of the case. At this stage support services must be adjusted to accommodate the needs of the situation. The wishes and desires of the child should be respected at all times as it is further essential that a professional should know the boundaries of his role. This is because at this stage the child would have started facing the reality of the situation, which he might have been hiding it for a long time, with someone ready to listen and understand the current situation (Galea 1999: 20–6). Thus, as it is important not to cause any potential harm to the well-being of the child such as with flashbacks when he is expressing his experience; abiding to the above claims helps prevent interference of professional boundaries while providing holistic support (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2013).

Support has even been incorporated in policies. In 2014 the Ministry for Education and Employment implemented a set of policies to support children in their education, including those in residential homes although this was not being stated in these policies. This was part of the Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2014–24. One of these policies is the Respect for All Framework (2014) which aims to provide a safe, secure and motivating environment where the child can express himself (Ministry for Education and Employment 2014). Another policy is Addressing Bullying Behaviour in School (2014) which aims to protect the vulnerability of children from ending up victims or bullies themselves (Ministry for Education and Employment 2014). These policies clearly indicate an era of change and improvement in the educational system. Although these policies are not directly targeted for children who are in care after undergoing abuse, they reflect the reality that some of these children face. A clear example is that some children who have experienced abuse and are placed in residential care as a result might end up victims of bullying owing to their vulnerability with coping with their traumatic experience.

These policies indicate an element of professional direction along with clear understanding of how these children should be supported to facilitate their integration

within the school environment while not exposing their vulnerability in front of others. These policies are meant to help these children not to recall their traumatic experience within the school environment. If one experiences challenging behaviour at school, for example, professionals are directed on how to handle the situation in the best way possible.

Change was also incorporated in the way children's homes function in their day-to-day operation. The management of children's homes started by incorporating a Personal Education Plan (PEP) where every child admitted in care is provided with a care plan which is an integral part of the support given to them to cope with their situation (Manchester City Council 2018). The need for providing every child with a PEP is beneficiary as it is a statutory tool which ensures that every professional involved in the child's case is actively prioritizing his education by carefully tracking his overall progress and supporting him holistically to achieve and be aspirational during his educational journey (ibid.). As the PEP is an evolving record of what needs to happen for looked-after children, to enable them to fulfil their potential while making the expected progress, this plan is made available to the school to ensure a holistic follow-up (Schembri 2016: 3–20). Moreover, as the PEP is reviewed and updated every six months, it requires the residential social workers, designated teachers, carers and other relevant professionals to join together to analyse and determine areas for improvement. The use of this strategy between the school and the residential home is effective since a clear guideline of how to act is established; it helps ensuring that educational needs are met, while aspirations are supported to help these children look positively at their future (Department for Education – UK 2014: 14–29). Locally, the use of the PEP requires every progress between the school and the home and vice-versa to be recorded and reported. This promotes a structured build-up coordination of work which helps the child to perform better educationally. Research indicates that providing a holistic system rather than a split one helps binding the PEP in a way that meets the needs of the child in a stabilized manner as there is a holistic consistency (Ministry for Education & Employment 2017). Additionally, the PEP is also used when coordinating Supervised Accessed Visits (SAVs) where the management collaborates with the child welfare agency to determine how family contact would affect the child in his education.

Research also shows that an in-house educational plan has been incorporated within children's homes to improve the academic support which is offered to these children (Cove Care 2015: 1). This plan is developed after an initial assessment is done for every child admitted in care as this helps to determine the basis of the child's education report and provides information to develop strategies to support his educational inclusion (ibid.). Such a personal educational plan would be used to develop an in-house educational plan where an educational coordinator from the Education Department is assigned to that particular residential home and would be responsible to maintain contact between the tutors who give numeracy and literacy lessons, the school and those professionals caring for the child within the home. In addition, while the coordinator's aim would be to improve and empower the child's academic achievement, importance would be given to contain the child's behaviour (Schembri 2016: 3–20). This is because they might be dealing with children who cannot sit down in class while they are aggressive; through this support plan coordinators could plan how the child should behave towards other classmates to follow up school lessons (MacGillivray et al. 2010: 92–384).

Eventually, the support plan will prove beneficiary since, as child-support services promote the use of a multi-disciplinary approach, management is obliged to implement

and observe that all individualized care plans are outlined in monthly scheduled plans to ensure that all key aspects are met. Research indicates that the most striking thing about abused children is their ability to survive and thrive in the future despite the trauma they would have experienced (Underwood 2016: 76). As a result, the care environment should be supportive to help these children enhance their resilience. Consequently, children's homes should aim to stabilize their experience through creating a friendly family environment rather than an institutional environment (ibid.).

Research Design

For the purpose of this study, qualitative research was chosen over quantitative research. Since qualitative research is primarily exploratory research (DeFranzo 2011:1), this approach was adopted as the researcher was looking into the experience of what it means to go through abuse while one is still attending compulsory education. It also helped the researcher to look further into the quality of educational support being provided to these children. Through this type of research, a researcher can gain an understanding of the underlying reasons and opinions about the subject; such research also provides insights into the problem and/or may even lead towards developing new ideas for future research (ibid.).

After adopting a qualitative research, semi-structured interviews were chosen as a research tool. McCammon (2010: 382) states that semi-structured interviews are used in research to enable the researcher to make an 'identification of the insights into an issue presented from the perspective of participants or end-users' (ibid.). Semi-structured interviews also offer a balance between the flexibility of an open-ended interview and the focus of a structured ethnographic survey (Rubin 2005: 1).

Different sampling techniques were used to select the participants. Purposive sampling was adopted as a technique, where the researcher had to rely on his own judgment when choosing participants (Saunders 2012: 1). Participants were selected after contacting different children's homes and informing them regarding the purpose of this study and asking them if the residential social work/head of care was willing to share his experience on working with victims of child abuse, by participating in an interview. The first eight participants who were willing to be interviewed and who came from different children's residential homes were selected as this was an advantage since different methods and approaches used within these different homes to support children in their education could be examined.

Additionally, judgmental sampling was also used as participants were chosen only if they had experiences with working with children admitted in care after experiencing abuse. This means that one's own level of knowledge and professional experience played an important role in ensuring this study's validity.
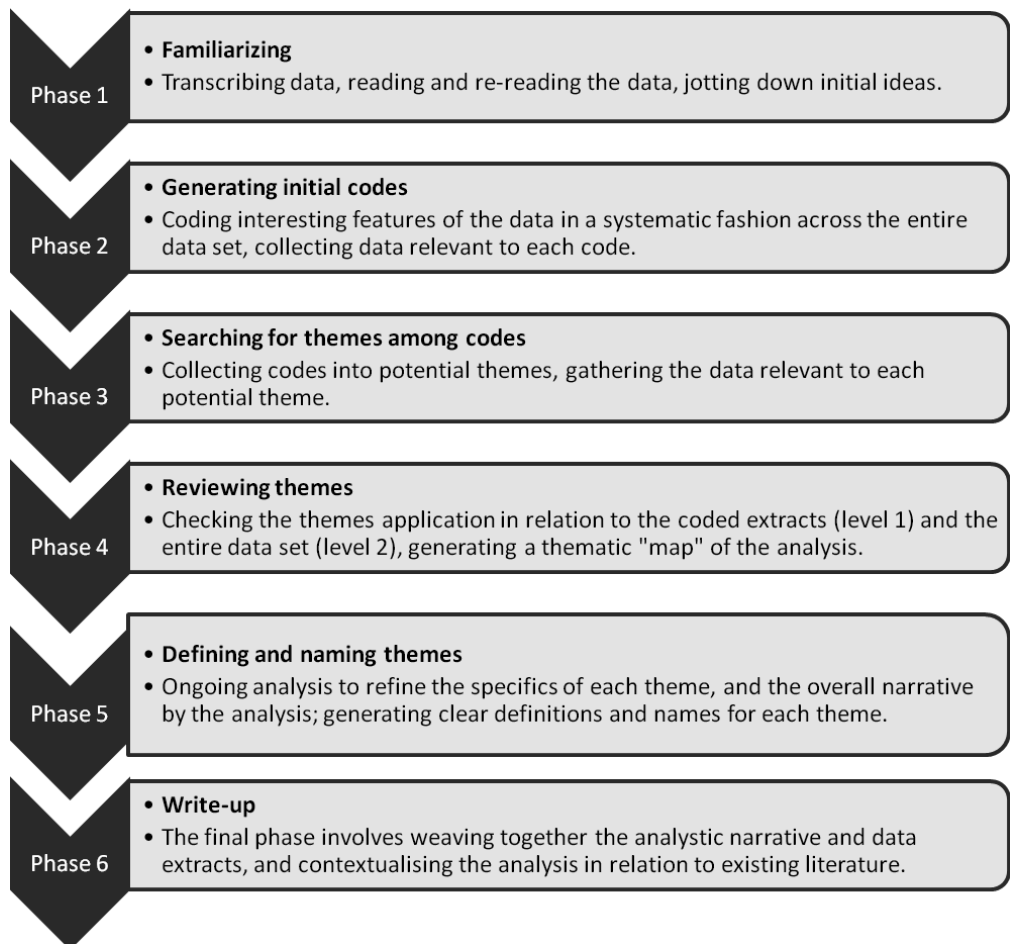
Any issues that may have arisen while collecting data were taken into account. Before every interview, an information letter explaining the aspects of this research, such as the procedures to be followed prior, during and after collection, as well as other important information was given to the interviewees.

A consent form was also given to all participants to ensure that they were provided with sufficient detailed information on the study so that they could make an informed, rational and voluntary decisions whether to participate. Here the researcher was abiding to confidentiality as both the information letter and consent form served as a source protector.

Permission for recording was also granted by the participants so that the researcher could dedicate his full attention to the participant. This helped in transcribing every interview conducted to ensure that visually no important detail was left out.

After the data was gathered, thematic analysis was used to ensure that data was organized and described in detail (JYU 2016). Using thematic analysis meant that this research followed six phases to create established, meaningful patterns.

Table 1: Source: University of Auckland 2018

Phase 1
- **Familiarizing**
- Transcribing data, reading and re-reading the data, jotting down initial ideas.

Phase 2
- **Generating initial codes**
- Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collecting data relevant to each code.

Phase 3
- **Searching for themes among codes**
- Collecting codes into potential themes, gathering the data relevant to each potential theme.

Phase 4
- **Reviewing themes**
- Checking the themes application in relation to the coded extracts (level 1) and the entire data set (level 2), generating a thematic "map" of the analysis.

Phase 5
- **Defining and naming themes**
- Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall narrative by the analysis; generating clear definitions and names for each theme.

Phase 6
- **Write-up**
- The final phase involves weaving together the analystic narrative and data extracts, and contextualising the analysis in relation to existing literature.

Once transcripts were completed, the researcher started questioning himself to familiarize himself to the data gathered. This led to coding where the researcher highlighted the most relevant information with regards to the study (Boyatzis 1998: 1) to helped prevent the mixing of data as some coded data had been collected together (Renee 2016). Coding occurred in two phases where first the portion of data to be coded during the first cycle coding processes ranged from a single word to full paragraphs of text (Strauss 2008: 3–7). In the second cycle, the previously coded portions were joined together in units which resulted in the development of reconfiguration of the codes (ibid.). Coding data helped capturing the topics being

referred to, which eventually helped in the next step of sorting codes into potential themes and categories (Renee 2016). This was done through the use of mind maps where everything was kept sorted into particular components. These components helped to maintain accurate records. These ensured that this study was addressing its aim as the researcher was asking himself whether the intentions regarding raising awareness on the impact of abuse on the child's education were being adhered.

The researcher ensured to be ethical in his considerations. To ensure that no moral harm would be caused, participants had to participate on a voluntary basis. While permission was acquired through the authorization of the organizational home directors, the researcher also abided with the organization/agency regulations as well to the MCAST's regulation policy. Here it was essential to protect the interviewees, the organizations that the interviewees was representing, as well their service users, so that the source of information would not be identified.

Finally, throughout the whole study the concept of reliability and validity was confined to by making direct references to the work of Gibbs (2007). Gibbs developed the idea that, for qualitative validity, the researcher must check the accuracy of the findings by employing certain procedures (ibid.).

As regard qualitative reliability, Gibbs indicates that the researchers' approach should be consistent across different researchers and different projects (ibid.). This section looks into how reliability and validity were addressed in this study by looking at the concept of credibility, dependability, transferability and conformability.

Credibility refers to believability or reasonableness (Guba Guba's 2018: 197–250). It involves understanding the phenomena that the research findings are found to be reliable and accepted by the different realities being studied since the participants are the ones who can legitimately judge the credibility of the results (Trochim 2006: 1). On the other hand, dependability is the description of the changes that occur during the course of research and an understanding of how such changes affect the study (Guba Guba's 2018: 197–250). Transferability is the ability to generalize or the extent to which the results of the research can be applied to other settings or contexts (Trochim 2006: 1). Bowen argues that transferability shows that there is a degree of similarity where findings are applicable to other contexts (Bowen 2011: 1). Conformability is the degree to which participants agree or corroborate with the research findings in contrast to the preferences and characteristics of the researcher (Guba Guba's 2018: 197–250).

In relation to Gibbs' theoretical framework, it was important for the researcher to identify his prejudice, research bias and experiences at the start of the study. This was done to enhance objectivity as the researcher was then capable of carrying out the study without any judgmental attitude and assumptions.

Another strategy adhered to was that an external person with experience in working with children in care but with no connection to the study was contacted and explained the purpose of this study. She was responsible to review and check whether the findings, interpretations and conclusions in the study supported the data provided in the beginning. The literature review was then compared to the findings gathered during data collection as well to the evaluation of this study as established in the conclusion.

Finally, it was important that, prior to conducting the interviews, participants were informed that there were no correct answers. This meant that participants felt confident in expressing their experiences and opinions thus enhanced their honesty. For the purpose of the next section, the original direct quotes which emerged from the findings are written on the left-hand side in italics (Maltese quotes), whilst the English translation is presented on the right-hand side.

Analysis of Research Findings

The following is a qualitative data analysis where themes that emerged are analysed in the vision of national and international studies concerning children who have gone through abuse.

Child Educational Level

A good educational level is today considered an essential aspect towards prospect future opportunities. Findings show that children who have gone through abuse may have this opportunity adversely affected. In this regard, literature has proven that there are several repercussions for a child who underwent abuse. As these ranges from psychological effects to behavioural problems, this means that focusing on education would not be a priority (Katz & Barnetz 2014: 41). Veltman and Browne's (2001: 39) meta-analysis study indicates that most children who would have experienced abuse are negatively affected in their education as they claim that 91% of such children had poor school achievements. In congruence with the above study, participants argued that upon admission in care, the child's educational level was generally found to be below the mainstream.

'Ħafna drabi tfal li jkunu għaddew minn abuse u jkunu ġew admitted in care, il-livell ta' edukazzjoni tagħhom ma tkunx waħda tajba.' (Participant 2)	'Most of the time, children who would have gone through abuse and were admitted in care as a result wouldn't have a good level of education.' (Participant 2)
'In ġenerali ma tkunx għolja ħafna. Ikun hemm tfal li they stand out; però din tkun fil-minoranza.' (Participant 8)	'In general it wouldn't be very high. There would be children who stand out; however these would be in the minority.' (Participant 8)

It is evident from the data that the effects that abuse would have left on the child's well-being may impact his ability to reach the norm success within the educational institution.

Personality, resilience and coping mechanisms play a vital role towards overcoming the effects of such traumatic events. Literature claims that not every child who experiences abuse is negatively impacted (Jaffee et al. 2004: 44–55). Some children have a strong personality, a good sense of humour and a strong intellect/active imagination which helps them to minimize the impact of abuse on their well-being (ibid.).

'Ġieli kellna tfal li għalkemm għaddew minn abbuż, xorta kienu mħajrin li jitgħallmu. Kien hemm tfal li l-iskola kienet tinteressahom u kont tarhom jaqraw u jistudjaw.' (Participant 2)

'We have had children who, although they would have undergone abuse, were still motivated to learn. There were children who were interested in school and you could see them reading and studying.' (Participant 2)

'Meta it-tfal ma jkunux affettwatti dik turik li tkun ġejja ħabba ir-resilience għax it-tfal ikollhom ċertu inner strengths li mijiex neċesserrjament normali.' (Participant 4)

'When children aren't affected this shows that this is coming because of their resilience because children have some inner strengths which aren't necessarily normal.' (Participant 4)

Data here determines that supporting a child to develop strong coping mechanisms to deal with the effects of the abuse does not rely only on the institution but also on the child's personality. This means that a child resistant to support may change the way he looks at his future. However, children with strong coping mechanisms are likely to keep moving on in their life events with positive determination which contributes towards success.

On the other hand, an interesting finding that emerged was that not all children who would have experienced abuse are influenced in their education.

'Għandna A student li avolja għaddiet minn ħafna affarijiet, hija l-aktar waħda brava, iġġib marki tajbin, tħobb ħafna l-iskola, u l-hobbies tagħha huma li taqra u tistudja.' (Participant 6)

'We have an A student who despite having gone through a lot she is one of the brightest where she obtains good grades, enjoys school and her hobbies are reading and studying.' (Participant 6)

However, from the data it emerged that the number of these cases are at a minimum; this clearly indicated that, as a professional, one has to assess every case individually in order to understand whether the individual is affected or not and what support is required in each case.

Children's Attitude

While some children may be affected in their ability to perform well in the main subjects, participants claimed that this may be the result of lack of concentration or low ability as this influences the child's ability to cope with his education.

'Għandna ħafna tfal fejn il-Maths huwa ta' problema għax it-tfal ma jkunux jistgħu jikkonċentraw fuq li jikkalkulaw u equations u graphs. Ċertu tfal ikollhom diffikultà li jikkonċentraw allura ma jkollhomx dik il-paċenzja għal dawn l-affarijiet.

'We have many children where Maths is a problem for them because they cannot concentrate on calculations, doing equations and graphs. Some children have a difficulty to concentrate; therefore they wouldn't have the patience to do these things.

Ukoll kawża tal-abbuż u neglect naraw ħafna developmental delays fit-tfal u jista' jkun tkun … niddejjaq ngħidha …. imma tkun eridaterja ukoll fejn il-parents jista jkollhom IQ baxx u tfal joħorġu hekk ukoll, iġifieri hemm pattern fejn it runs within the family.' (Participant 8)

Also as a consequence of the abuse and neglect, we encounter several developmental delays in these children which can be … I hate to say it … but it is inherited where their parents have a low IQ level and the children inherit it. Thus there is a pattern where it runs within the family.' (Participant 8)

Since data here proposes that there are different causes why a child's education is negatively impacted, a professional person should clearly examine a child's case holistically prior to making interventions as he cannot perceive these children as being educational failures.

However, researchers have argued that dealing with the effects of abuse depends on the child's coping mechanisms which may be influenced through having a strong personality, a good sense of humour and a strong intellect/active imagination (Jaffee et al. 2004: 44–55). Others have argued that developing strong coping mechanisms depends on the individual's environment (Collishaw et al. 2007: 211).

'Coping strategies *kultant imorru minn estrem għal ieħor. Għandna tfal li ma jridu jkunu jafu xejn b'dak kollu li għandu x'jaqsam ma skola għax huwa difficli ħafna biex jikkonċentraw ma dak kollu li għandu x'jaqsam ma skola. Kelli tfal li jgħiduli li: x'ħin ġejt biex naħseb fejn it-teacher bdiet tippretendi minnha li noqgħodu attenti, moħħi mill-ewwel beda jimraħ fuq affarijiet ħziena u ħafna esperjenzi. Imbagħad hemm tfal oħra li jirnexxielhom jikowpjaw propju għax qishom jiġu obsessed li jiffukaw ħafna fuq l-istudju.' (Participant 3)*

'Coping strategies sometimes go from one extreme to the other. We have children who do not want to know anything that is school-related with a result that they find it difficult to concentrate on everything which has to do with school. I had children tell me that: when I came to think and the teacher expected us to remain focus, my brain immediately started thinking on bad things and experiences. Then there are children who manage to cope because they become obsessed with focussing on their studies.' (Participant 3)

In this regard, it is seen that supporting a child to develop strong coping mechanisms to deal with the effects of abuse does not rely only on the institution but also on the child's personality. This means that a child resistant to support may change the way he looks at his future. However, those with strong coping mechanisms are likely to keep moving on in their life events with positive determination which contribute towards success.

Research also claims that different parenting styles have been exposed to influence children's perspective towards succeeding in education (Bonnici, 2014).

'Hemm tfal li ħabba it-trobbija tagħhom ta'
meta kienu żgħar, aħna dejjem nitgħallmu li
l-ewwel tliet snin tat-tfal huma l-bażi ta' kollox.
Issa jekk huma ma trabbewx ġo familja fejn
l-edukazzjoni tagħhom hija importanti, probabli
l-perspective tagħhom fuq l-edukazzjoni mijiex
ħa tkun waħda tajba. Mhux ħa jagħtu kas jew
tinterresahom.' (Participant 6)

'There are children who as a result of their
upbringing when they are young, we
always learn that the first three years of
the children are the basis of everything.
If they wouldn't have been brought
up in a family where their education is
important, probably their perspective on
education wouldn't be a good one. They
aren't going to pay attention or it won't
interest them.' (Participant 6)

Therefore, it is argued that while a child's priorities may be influenced as a result of
abuse, one's family culture also exerts a great influence on his prospects towards
education. This is because if the child had never been encouraged to attend school
while he was exposed to abuse, his priority would be to overcome the traumatic
event. As this may take the child a long period of time, one would fall behind in his
education till a point that coping with education becomes nearly impossible due to
the loss of knowledge.

Apart from the children's family culture, it is common that the effects of abuse on the
children's well-being are also reflected on one's own attitude where it was a commonly
found that children may show some resistance when placed in out-of-home care after
undergoing abuse (Abdulaziz 2013: 55). Such an attitude may be a result of a lack of
understanding of why they were placed in out-of-home care which may accumulate
towards exhibiting problematic behaviour as a way of gaining attention (ibid).

'Meta jidħlu in care, niġġeneralizza, il-behaviour
tat-tfal aparti l-aspett edukattiv ma tkunx xi
ħaġa tajba. Hemm tfal li they start acting out u
hemm children who act in. Allura hemm children
who they behave bad, oħrajn ikunu aggressivi
l-iskola, forsi ma jkollhomx attenzjoni twila.
Imbagħad hemm tfal oħrajn li forsi jsiru kwieti
iż-żejjed. Dan jaf ikun ukoll mod kif jigbdu
l-attenzjoni fuqhom.' (Participant 2)

'Once they are in care, I am generalizing,
the behaviour of the children, apart from
the educational aspect, wouldn't be
something positive. There are children
who start acting out and there are
children who act in. Therefore, there
are children who behave badly, others
who behave aggressively at school and
maybe they don't have a long-time
attention-span. Then there are children
who may become too silent. This may
also be a way of gaining attention.'
(Participant 2)

Data here seems to propose that while children who have experienced abuse are
affected in various ways, the attitude that they may be exhibited in out-of-home
care may be a result of that their priority would still be to continue living within their
primary family. This makes it evident that, while it is important for care institutions to
understand the underlying reasons of such an attitude, they should focus on dealing
with the effects of the children's behaviour in order to help them cope with their
situation.

Additionally, the effects on one's own behaviour as a result of abuse may range from
chronic low self-esteem to severe dissociative states (Child Welfare Information
Gateway 2013).

'Hekk kif l-abbuż jaffetwa kif it-tifel jara lilu nnifsu ħa jaffettwa l-kapaċità biex jissoċjalizza ma' tfal oħra, kif ukoll l-abilità li jikkonċentra fuq xi task. Riżultat ta dan, it-tfal jipruvaw iżommu is-sitwazzjoni tagħhom sigrieta ħabba l-biża' li jkunu labelled.' (Participant 1)

'As abuse affects how a child portrays his self-image, it would eventually affect his ability to interact with other children and their ability to concentrate on a task. As a result, these children try to keep their situation a secret owing to the fear of being labelled.' (Participant 1)

In this regard, data seems to indicate that the experience of abuse may negatively affect the individual's control of his life. However, it is claimed that a holistic support system is always needed to help the child cope with his life events.

Supporting Children's Education

It is important that children's homes support children in care holistically in their education. This is due to the fact that research claims that, while the education concept is a strong pillar in a child's life (Government of UK 2017), it has been proven that promoting the school culture within the home helps the child to adapt within the school curriculum system better as he would feel that there is a holistic support between home and school (Emond 2012: 194–202).

'Once li tibda toħloq kultura ta' edukazzjoni fid-dar qisha tant kemm tiġi ovvja li tmur l-iskola li t-tfal qatt ma jgħidulek le.' (Participant 3)

'Once you start creating to an educational culture within the home, going to school becomes so obvious that children wouldn't think to tell you no.' (Participant 3)

Data suggests that care homes need to have a strong supporting educational system incorporated within the culture system which motivates and helps the child to remain focused on his education.

Moreover, it was argued that when developing a supportive system, one should base it on feedback which is needed to develop an efficient care plan and to maintain it. Literature claims that, without feedback, the care system would be rigid as there would not be an individualized service (Carnegie 2015). During the whole process of feedback, a Personal Educational Plan is developed to ensure that the child's needs are constantly being addressed individually (ibid.). This will eventually lead to developing an efficient in-house educational plan which will help supporting a child in care better throughout his education.

'Parti mill-assessment tagħna huwa li nindagaw mal-iskejjel u naraw it tifel kif is-sena l-oħra/ din is-sena qiegħed bħala livel edukattiv, kif inhu sejjer, għandux LSA jew le, x'kienu id-diffikultajiet u l-istrenghts, hemmx xi IEP?, etc fejn hemm nieħdu stampa ċara tal-livell edukattiv tat-tifel fejn jinsab bħalissa.' (Participant 2)

'Part of our assessment is to interact with schools and see how last year/this year the child is doing in terms of educational level, how he is doing, if he has an LSA or not, what were the difficulties and strengths, if there is IEP?, etc. Here we get a clear picture of the educational level the child is currently in.' (Participant 2)

Data in the present study indicates that, while conducting an assessment should be the priority to support the child holistically, it is essential to get feedback from the individuals who are involved in the child's case. This means that while facts would

be gathered, an efficient in-house educational programme would be developed to address the child's educational needs holistically.

Management Support

Research has shown that the management's contribution is vital in care homes in helping children who have experienced abuse to overcome their traumatic experiences (Underwood 2016: 76). Research has proven that providing a friendly family environment rather than an institutional environment through supporting employees helps children to stabilize their life again (ibid). This system is reflected in one of the participants' argument where:

'Bħala management aħna nvoluti ħafna fid-daily life tat-tfal. Hemm integrità bejnietna għax m'hemmx qasma bejn dak li qed nagħmlu aħna il-management u l-istaff għax aħna l-istess nies. Aħna nemmnu li management irid ikun involut ħafna fil-ħajja tat-tfal. Infatti aħna mis-1.30/2.00 p.m. l'hemm kulħadd jitlaq mill-uffiċju u kemm jista' jkun ikun qed jipparteċipa fil-ħajja tat-tfal b'xi mod jew ieħor'' (Participant 3)

'As management we are involved in the daily life of these children. Among us there is integrity because there isn't a division between what we do as a management and as staff as we are the same people. We believe that the management has to be involved in the life of these children. In fact from 1.30/2.00 p.m. forward, we leave the office in order to ensure that we are participating as much as possible in life of these children in some way or another.' (Participant 3)

It is proposed that the management should be involved on a practical level since this is beneficiary towards understanding front liners. Data seems to indicate that this helps in understanding the struggles that employees deal with on a daily basis, thus being capable of developing adequate policies and providing practical materials which better assist and direct the work of these professionals. Eventually, this leads to enhancing confidence in the staff to give their utmost to support these children.

Limitations

This study faced several limitations. One was that, during data collection, socially desirability bias may have been encountered because interviewees may have responded to a question in a way that they thought the question should be answered, rather than giving a true answer.

Another limitation was that, since this study was qualitative in nature and interviews were held with just eight participants, one cannot draw general conclusions. Creswell (2009:190) claims that to have more accurate results, a researcher should carry out between twenty and thirty interviews. However, due to time constraints, interviewing more participants was not possible. Nevertheless, since participants came from different agencies that support children of different ages, this gave quite a wide picture of the local children's out-of-home care sector.

Conclusion

This paper has proven that, despite the fact that abuse is a negative event that no one should pass through as it goes against the value of humanity (Coalson 2013), society should never look at children in care as being educational failures. Indeed professionals working with children in out-of-home care should enhance a supportive

attitude in their practice to help the child rebuild the trust that abuse would have destroyed, thus helping him to develop the skills needed to face the future without fear.

This research made it evident that several study areas can be explored in the future. In fact, longitudinal studies could determine what happens to children who have experienced abuse after completing their compulsory education. Such a study can be conducted through semi-structured interviews held at different intervals with the researcher using the children's attitudes, beliefs, feelings, reactions and experiences to understand the struggles they face when leaving care after finishing compulsory education. This will be vital towards proposing new strategies to better support children in care to proceed to tertiary education.

Future research could also look into why some children admitted in care do not proceed to tertiary education. Several causes may be explored such as how their past experiences might have impacted their present thinking when it comes to proceeding to tertiary education. This study may further explore the existent supportive measures that assist these children during their tertiary education and what improvements can be done. This study may help develop the basis of a system which supports the child to remain on course to reach tertiary education.

Research could also examine whether different children's residential homes influence differently the child's ability to succeed. This research could be carried out through case-study research which evaluates the services that support these children. This proposed study should evaluate better which educational methods help children in care to succeed educationally.

Other improvements could be the development of a policy to support the education of children admitted in care. Since currently we do not have a direct policy which has been developed to cater for the educational needs of children in care, developing such a policy to assist professionals involved in the child's life in their day-to-day practice is vital as this would lead towards having an ethical performance.

Another policy which may be developed is to examine how care professionals work with external professionals involved in the child's case. Since currently there is no established policy on how care professionals should work with external professionals, this policy should facilitate coordination between professionals so that the child will develop the sense of security as professionals will intervene in the right time to motivate the child to face life events.

Finally, improvements are also needed within the service provision. In fact, it is recommended that every child is provided with an educational psychological assessment upon admission in care, which is vital to understanding better the impact that abuse would have left on the child in terms of his educational level. It is essential that this assessment should be funded by the government as children's homes are struggling to provide every child with an educational psychological assessment owing to financial burdens.

Also since today children's homes are providing numerical and literacy lessons to help these children in their education, the government should support residential homes in assisting them by providing free private numerical and literacy lessons; thus, investing in the education of these children.

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