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# Childcare workers: Challenges faced during Covid-19

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**Abstract:** The Coronavirus (COVID–19) pandemic has increased anxiety and stress among childcare workers in many communities. This has given rise to the question of whether childcare workers have the capabilities to execute their operational responsibilities effectively during this period in ensuring that the children are well taken care of. The theory of crisis was used in the study to explore the resilience of childcare workers in managing the well-being of vulnerable orphans during this period. A qualitative approach was applied, using focus group interviews involving 10 childcare workers from the Lefika la Botshabelo Orphaned and Vulnerable care centre who have been beneficiaries of the programme too, to establish the role the care workers played in ensuring that the orphaned and vulnerable children were well-taken care of during lockdown. The responses showed the importance of training, personal and professional

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Enid Pitsoane is an Educational psychologist, works at University of South Africa (UNISA) for head counselling where she offers career counselling and personal counselling to students. She has been involved in this profession for the past 17 years where she gives guidance to students on relevant career paths, adjustment skills to tertiary life as well as other personal challenges that affect students during their course of, study e.g., trauma, grief, relationships, etc. She also has a private practice which has been running for 18 years, where she specialises with children experiencing learning barriers and intervention with parents on how to assist their children. Her passion is also working and empowering communities, this encouraged her to identify orphans to give them support so that they can achieve their life goals. Fhatuwani Makahane is a student counsellor working at the University of South Africa. He has a master's degree in educational psychology. He has been in the counselling profession for the past 10 years. His passion is facilitating career workshops to the community with the aim of encouraging youth to further their studies. As an individual coming from a rural area in Venda, in South Africa, he wants to see learners from the rural communities being empowered and their futures shaped meaningfully.

Enid Pitsoane

## PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

The research paper covers pertinent real-life issues in the world where many children are orphaned due to the loss of parents. Furthermore, the paper outlines stories of hope because of the involvement of academics in working with childcare workers and orphans. As a society, our responsibility is to care for the orphans and vulnerable children so that we can reduce their emotional and psychological distress as a result of losing significant people in their lives. This can improve the moral fibre of the community. How do we reduce that, by academics, getting involved with NGOs and supporting them with knowledge and skills to efficiently do their work. Engaged scholarship is promoted when academics work together with the community not only gathering research but also when they empower the community to do better.

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development as well as the importance of adapting to the recent COVID–19 regulations in optimally caring for orphans. These results suggested that Lefika childcare workers are in dire need of new, innovative ways to perform their duties.

**Subjects: Social Psychology; Social Work; Sociology of Culture**

**Keywords: Vulnerable; orphans; COVID-19; childcare workers; community**

## 1. Introduction

The COVID–19 pandemic has drastically disadvantaged communities. Community-based childcare workers struggled to support households impacted by socio-economic issues and in particular aiding the orphaned and vulnerable children in the community. Kentor and Thompson (2021) mention that the pandemic has had a noticeable impact on individuals, professionals, and businesses. Due to COVID–19, individuals were forced to adjust and devise innovative ideas. Human Sciences Research Council (2014) studies found that through consistent collaboration between government departments and community programs, the effects of these socio-economic issues could be addressed and be combated, hence the existence of childcare workers in taking care of orphans in communities. On 27 March 2020, the South African government declared a state of national disaster where citizens were forced to adhere to social distancing, the wearing of masks and constant hand sanitising. In addition, curfews were implemented. These drastic changes brought uncertainties in how the childcare workers would execute their duties to maintain the well-being and safety of the families they were taking care of. This research explores the role, experiences and challenges faced by childcare workers at the Lefika la Botshabelo Orphaned and Vulnerable children Centre (OVC) based in Stinkwater near Hammanskraal.

Research Questions

What are the challenges faced by care workers of Lefika la Botshabelo Orphaned & Vulnerable Children during COVID-19 Pandemic?

What are the experiences of care workers of Lefika la Botshabelo Orphaned & Vulnerable Children during COVID-19 Pandemic?

Research objectives

To have a better understanding of the difficulties experienced by those providing care of the orphans and vulnerable children at Lefika la Botshabelo during the COVID-19 pandemic.

To understand experiences faced by childcare workers because of restrictions impost by COVID-19 pandemic.

## 2. Background

Lefika la Botshabelo Orphaned & Vulnerable Children Centre has been operational for the past 14 years, with the aim of actively improving the lives of orphaned and vulnerable children. The motivation behind the starting the projected was informed by several children and their parents or guardians who have been affected by Aids or who had lost parents during the Covid pandemic. An orphan is defined as a child who lost one or both parents through death and the guardian's unwillingness to provide for the child (Skinner et al., 2006) Skinner et al. (2006) further argue that a vulnerable child should be defined as "someone who has little or no access to basic needs or rights". In South Africa, the Bill of Rights found in the Constitution stipulates children's basic rights and needs. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, maintains that children have certain rights, such as the right to appropriate care, protection, basic health care and social services. The Department of Social Development (2005) mentions that services to children are to be provided in relation to the

Child Care Act, 1983. South Africa is filled with communities such as the Stinkwater community, which is affected by various socio-economic issues, hence the need for centres like Lefika to assist in taking care of orphans and vulnerable children. The centre makes use of the integrated community development model to achieve the transformation of lives through partnership with various stakeholders such as the Siyaphila Youth Development Services. Lefika currently uses 10 childcare workers to assist children and families to cope with basic needs. Thumbadoo (2013) argues that a childcare worker is expected to be a supervising adult and provide support to vulnerable children, as stated in the Children's Act. Molepo and Delport (2015) conclude that adult supervision provided to vulnerable or child-headed households should be structured to ensure children receive quality care. Most children in the Stinkwater community become orphaned due to HIV/AIDS; this supports the importance of providing quality, and beneficial care to these children to better their environment. According to heart for Africa organization report of 2023, 52 million orphans are living in Africa. This number includes three specific groups, those who have lost a mother, those who have lost a father, and those who have lost both parents. Furthermore, the report stated that 20% of these orphans come from sub-Saharan countries.

The research done during 2020 in what is described as a "heart breaking hidden pandemic", stated that up to 6.7 m children globally have been orphaned or lost a caregiver due to COVID−19. In absolute numbers, South Africa was estimated to have 134,500 COVID-19 orphans, with "at least one in every 200 children in every age group having experienced COVID−19-associated orphanhood." (Medical brief; 2022). South Africa ranked second highest of the 21 countries modelled, with 7.22 orphans per 1,000, behind Peru (8.28), according to a study in The Lancet Child and Adolescent Health (Hillis, Unwin, et al., 2021).

Statistics SA report of 2020 revealed that there were 2.9 million orphans in South Africa (Independent news). The numbers of orphans in SA rose drastically after the pandemic which necessitated organisations to act in supporting the orphans. Many organisation supporting orphans depend on donations to support the orphans. Lefika la Botshabelo supports a total of 42 families and 87 orphaned and Vulnerable children in the centre. The childcare workers employed by the Lefika depends on Grant support from Social development and donations from stakeholders. Lefika has 10 childcare workers who assist children with scholastic work and the support they need. These orphans stay at their own homes, there is no specific allocation number to each childcare worker.

According to Herlmerhost (2017), childcare workers with interactive skills had a positive impact on fostering positive interactions between children and those around them. A previous study by Manyerenyere (2017) found that lack of training and motivation was one of the challenges faced by care workers, which seems to be a concern to most childcare workers in many countries. Manyerenyere (2017) further argues that challenges faced by childcare workers affect the level of dedication and desire to be a part of the childcare programmes. These challenges pose a need for research studies to be conducted with the aim of not only identifying challenges but collating improvement plans to improve the experiences of childcare workers. Previous research studies supported the argument that consistent personal and professional support of childcare workers is necessary, and with the changes in the world, such as COVID−19, this has become even more evident.

## 3. Theoretical framework

It was determined that James' crisis theory was the best way to address the difficulties that arose during COVID 19. The crisis hypothesis places an emphasis on the fact that people feel powerless when confronted with difficult circumstances that put their lives in jeopardy. According to Tedrick and Wachter Morris (2011), Crisis Theory outlines several major assumptions or components that characterize what an individual goes through during a crisis. These include a triggering event, inefficiency and imbalance, breakdown in coping, a reduction in defensiveness, and the time-limited nature of an acute crisis response. These are the feelings that childcare workers

experienced when priority was out of control. The waking of COVID-19 threw the childcare workers off balance and disrupted their usual method of doing things, leaving them uncertain about how to proceed with their responsibilities. According to McDonald (2016), the crisis theory focuses on the position of the individual since the person does not know how to respond to a situation they experienced or how to deal with it.

According to crisis theory, a plan should be established to deal with the overwhelming situation, therefore the childcare workers responded with suggestions on plans to put into action how to handle the obstacles they faced to assist orphans.

## 4. Literature review

Childcare workers' have been recognised as possessing specific expertise and skills which entail a unique method of working with children and families. Caregiving is in most cases voluntary, which often results in sacrifice and the dedication of oneself to ensuring that the child receives the necessary care, love, and support. Caregivers themselves also need the same care, love, and support from organisations and communities, because they are also affected by the pressures, stress, and traumas which they witness.

## 5. Provision of needs and care for vulnerable children

Care centres are expected to provide a child or youth with basic needs and care. They should offer developmental programs for children in trouble with the law, those dealing with addiction, and those who have special needs. Care centres should assist youths with adjustment to a new life when they leave the centre due to turning 18 (Children's Act 38 of 2005). Childcare workers are at the forefront in advocating for a major change in the way children's homes are run. According to Manyerenyere (2017), childcare workers can be considered as either primary or secondary, and both categories experience stressful conditions in providing care to orphans.

## 6. The role of Ubuntu in the provision of services

The profession of child and youth care work encourages child-focused personnel in the welfare sector. The context of child and youth care services in communities in South Africa differs vastly from that in other Western countries, and the application of child and youth care work characteristics and skills in a South African context is vital to both understanding and exposure. The need for sensitivity to cultural nuances when delivering child and youth care services is vital. Thumbadoo (2013) states that cultural safety is a state of being, which a child or young person experiences, that contributes to their personal well-being, as well as their social and cultural frames of reference is acknowledged. Cultural safety requires that each child or young person be provided with reasons for feeling hopeful that their needs would be attended to, in terms that they will understand (Thumbadoo, 2013).

The quality of childcare given by parents, family, or caregivers, largely determines a young child's access to the means for physical development, early learning, safety, and security. Childcare workers face major challenges within their field, such as emotional stress, heightened by juggling many responsibilities and pressure to emotionally support the children. The presence of caring and nurturing adults who can stimulate children, especially from birth to the age of three, contributes to improved neutral connections and facilitates emotional bonding, self-confidence, and development of relationships (Creches, 2020).

The COVID−19 crisis in South Africa provided a significant context for the role of the community child and youth care workers to be explored and exposed. South African legislation articulates both the recognition of child-headed households in the context of the HIV/AIDS and the recognition of the child and youth care workers as one of the social service professionals (Atmore et al., 2012). The Act also applies to the effects of COVID−19 on our communities.

The needs of individual children who lost parents to Aids are not necessarily greater than those of children who have lost parents to other causes, such as COVID−19. In recent years, South Africa has experienced a sharp rise in the number of orphaned and vulnerable children, as is also the experience globally. The number of orphans was expected to increase between 2006 and 2010. The most vulnerable of children are those who fall through the safety nets of both community and family. Increasingly, children are living in situations where there is no adult in the home. In many poorer countries, families have continued to absorb children into the wider family (Naidoo, 2007).

## 7. Community support

According to Manyerenyere (2017), the community does not support childcare workers in the same way that it cares for orphaned and vulnerable children. In addition, the community's attitude makes them unresponsive to the need for support of childcare workers. Manyerenyere (2017) states that childcare workers do not receive benefits that would normally be afforded to everyone due to the community thinking they benefit from the centres they volunteer at. Consequently, 80% of the childcare workers have stated that they do not feel appreciated by their respective communities, while 20% state the community supports them. According to Loria et al. (2021), the pandemic has shed light on the deficiencies within the healthcare, education, economic and child welfare systems. Furthermore, studies conducted by Loria et al. (2021) state that due to COVID−19, innovations need to be developed that will better benefit children and care workers. These studies show that the impact of COVID−19 on the childcare profession has been detrimental to orphaned and vulnerable children and childcare workers.

## 8. Research methodology

This research made use of qualitative research methods, which can be interpreted as an organized investigation into social phenomena that occur in their natural settings (Creswell, 2014; Yin, 2013). The qualitative research approach is derived from the interpretivism paradigm in the sense that it focuses on the lived experiences of persons in their natural environments. This can include how individuals behave, how organizations function, and how interactions shape relationships. Therefore, this does make sense with Lefika la Botshabelo OVC because communication throughout the time of COVID-19 was an emphasis, and this included how each member behaved. The study employed ethnography research on a group of childcare workers at the Lefika la Botshabelo OVC centre. Caulfield (2022) defines ethnography as qualified research that involves immersing yourself in a particular community or organisation to observe their behaviour and interactions up close. Ethnography encompasses studying people in context, primarily making observations rather than concentrating on hard data and numbers, which characterises the quantitative method. In addition, ethnography is a method that is regarded to be an efficient way to collect data since it enables researchers to study individuals in their natural habitat without disrupting either their way of life or their surroundings. This makes ethnography an effective method of data collection (Creswell, 2014). As a result, it gives researchers the opportunity to understand their subjects' way of life (Yin, 2013). Because of this, any other form of data collecting would not be appropriate for this study, the purpose of which was to investigate people in the environments in which they reside. The researcher has been involved with the organisation and childcare workers for the past 15 years, hence ethnography was the most relevant to the study since their interaction with orphans and childcare workers has been observed for a period to establish how they relate and assist orphans.

## 9. Sample and sampling strategy

According to Gill (2020), the goal of sampling in qualitative research is to select enough participants that provide rich data to understand the phenomenon studied. Ethnography

research method was employed in this study in the form of interviews to produce detailed and comprehensive accounts of different social phenomenon (Reeves et al., 2008). One structured focus group was conducted with a sample of 10 individuals, seven females and three males, mostly from Stinkwater community outside Pretoria. All participants of the focus group are childcare workers of Lefika la Botshabelo OVC. Convenience sampling was used to collect the various experiences of the childcare workers. According to Chapman and McNeill (2005), purposive sampling occurs when a researcher chooses a specific group of individuals or place to study because it is most relevant to the study. A purposive sampling strategy was used in the study because all the participants in the study are involved in caring for vulnerable orphans at the Lefika la Botshabelo OVC centre. From the sample of ten individuals, five completed grade 12 as their highest qualification, while three indicated that they have passed grade 11, one has passed Grade 10 and the last participant has a postgraduate degree.

## 10. Participants information

| Pseudonym | Age | Grade passed |
| --- | --- | --- |
| RM | 20 | 12 |
| KM | 19 | 11 |
| MP | 27 | 12 |
| KG | 25 | 12 |
| QM | 20 | 11 |
| BR | 29 | 12 |
| CP | 23 | 12 |
| DC | 26 | 11 |
| TM | 29 | Degree in Social Worker |
| GP | 30 | 10 |

## 11. Data collection procedure

Chapman and McNeill (2005) define focus group interviews as not only measuring the extent of an opinion; they can investigate the reasons why it was formed. This data collection method was chosen to gain in-depth information from the participants. One focus group was chosen which according to Morgan, 2006, is the interactive discussion of a topic by a collection of all participants and a team of facilitators as one group in one place. This is the most common and classical type of focus group discussion. The session took place in a private room at the Lefika centre. The focus group was conducted by one interviewer. Childcare workers were asked to respond to questions at different intervals. The questions were translated into their mother tongue for ease of reference. The questions were written down to get the childcare workers to think about and discuss aspects of being a childcare worker at Lefika la Botshabelo OVC, without feeling any pressure. These questions included: (a) What are your duties as a childcare worker? (b) What concerns have you personally noted regarding the children and families you work with? (c) Do you think the pandemic has made operations difficult? If so, in what way? (d) What kind of personal training or development do you feel would help you perform your duties optimally? After all questions were asked, the interviewer asked the participants for any more suggestions or comments.

## 12. Ethical consideration

The research was conducted in accordance with stipulated university policy. Confidentiality and appropriate COVID–19 procedures were observed and followed before, during and after the interviews. The researcher has worked with Lefika OVC centre for the past 10 years, developing the

childcare workers' skills to care for the orphans. The researcher has been observing their growth and engaging on a regular basis. It was during lockdown when the director of the project requested that a survey be conducted to investigate experiences and challenges the childcare workers may be facing in assisting the orphans. Consent forms were sent to the participants through the director's office. Forms were collected, and 10 participants agreed to take part in the study. An ethical clearance certificate was sourced from the University under the Tirisano Community project of Advocacy for Diversity, Inclusion and Wellbeing with the project number 2022_CA6300_315.

## 13. Data analysis procedure

According to Gill (2020), the purpose of qualitative research is to explore and understand the meaning grounded in human experience. This research study was conducted using the qualitative research method employing an approach known as thematic data analysis. According to Creswell (2014), the thematic data analysis places an emphasis on identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning found within qualitative data. As a result, thematic analysis was used in identifying recurring themes that were comparable to one another in certain respects and grouping them together. This is evident by using focus group interview as a form of data collection. Questions used in the focus group were formulated by the interviewer with the sole purpose of acquiring response from the sample. Data from the focus group interview schedules were analysed using atlas-ti, where responses were coded into main themes and further into sub themes. The picture below depicts the categories of themes:

## 14. Themes and sub-themes

| Main themes | Sub themes |
| --- | --- |
| Personal & Professional growth or development | Mental wellness |
| | Training |
| Effects of COVID−19 | Resources |
| | Regulations |

Based on the data analysis, the two main categories were identified and the subcategories, as per the table above.

## 15. Personal and professional growth or development

### 15.1. Mental wellness

This subcategory captured most of the participants' intense feelings about the need for emotional and mental support. The childcare workers expressed the desire to receive necessary resources to deal with stress inflicted by both professional and personal issues. Participant 1 indicated:

"I need stress reliever, because the problem that we face sometimes they traumatize us, because some of the issue we can't resolve." While participant 2 commented, "I've suggested we should have a workshop where we talk about our home problem." One of the participants explained that "Childcare workers should be motivated time and again to boost their morale."

### 15.2. Training

Several participants expressed how receiving training would positively impact their lives. Participant 4 commented on needing to complete their matric studies, which necessitates computer training. Participant 5 said management should do a skills audit and place childcare workers accordingly and assist the childcare workers to develop a self-development plan. Childcare workers should be motivated time and again to boost their morale. The comment seemed to be echoed by most participants.

Participant 6 expressed how "this training may come often to transform our lives …" while participant 7, said, "management should include us in AGM as they use to previously." One of the duties that the participants mention was planting vegetables and taking care of the garden. In response to this, another participant suggested, "If we can have someone who is dealing with agriculture could visit us maybe once a month just to check on the progress on what we are doing."

## 16. Effects of COVID–19

### 16.1. Resources
This subcategory captured the participants' intense feelings about the effect of COVID–19 on their ability to perform optimally in their roles as childcare workers. Participant 1 expressed concern about lack of resources and said, "since we don't have working resource it is becoming more difficult for us to work and most of our families do not earn enough so some lost their job and depend on grant and now, we can't use technology because we can't afford." While participant 5 said, "we don't have electricity to make work easy".

### 16.2. Regulations
This subcategory echoed the participants' concerns of how the pandemic has a negative impact on their work environment. Participant 9 mentioned the "lack of meetup and communication" because of the regulations enforced during the pandemic. While participant 10 said, "we could not be present at a life space of children as we normally do because of the covid–19 regulations for example no visiting people".

## 17. Discussion
Kentor and Thompson (2021) assert that the COVID–19 pandemic affected various aspects of people's lives and one of those areas that were affected was childcare work. The results indicate that childcare workers had a challenging time, especially since they do not come from privileged backgrounds themselves. Some of the workers are unemployed while others are dependent on their families or the stipend from the NGO Lefika La Botshabelo. Those same family members were also hit by the pandemic, which resulted in some of them losing their jobs, which impacted on access to technology and data, which is essential for virtual meeting attendance. The participants stated that there was no communication and meeting, due to a lack of data and access to technological devices. This challenge affects the progress and reporting of well-being of children under their care. It is therefore necessary for the organisation to supply the childcare workers with data so that communication can continue since most services are online after COVID-19 to enable the childcare workers to continue with uninterrupted services.

Another challenge presented in the study conducted at the Lefika la Botshabelo Orphaned and Vulnerable Children Centre is that there is no electricity, which makes working in that environment even more difficult. The children need food, which requires electricity to cook, and take warm baths. Lack of such results in families resorting to making fires, which may affect their well-being due to the smoke inhalation. This further had an impact on access to welfare services as they lacked basic health skills. The COVID–19 pandemic prevented the childcare workers from being in physical contact with the children as visits to hospitals, correctional centres, old-age homes, and orphanages were prohibited. This presented a challenge because the children have now become accustomed to having the caregivers around them.

The results also indicated a shortage of food because places such as orphanages are mostly dependent on sponsors. Nhep and Van Doore (2021) believe that these companies which usually donate food supplies were themselves hard hit and, as a result, they had to reduce the quantity or halt the sponsorships. Childcare work programmes allowed for the workers and the children to bond and become family; therefore, when the pandemic prevented this, there was a lack of communication and opportunities which affected both the workers and children. Thesen (2014) suggests that orphaned children have abandonment issues which lead to behavioural issues such

as aggression, destroying property and being withdrawn, as their parents have technically left them even if it was not by their choosing. For the childcare workers whom they have bonded with to not be present as they used to be, can act as a trigger to them.

The study demonstrates a correlation between the challenges that caregivers face in their personal capacity and the challenges they are met with while working at Lefika la Botshabelo Orphaned and Vulnerable Children Centre. There is a lack of resources and adequate knowledge on both ends, and the ability to execute their work in the best way possible has therefore been compromised. The caregivers not having mentors or personal assistance has led them to performing their duties without guidance, which can lead them and the children astray as they are advising and grooming people who are going to be adults without adequate knowledge. Warwick J.K (2013) summarises that these are children who have been orphaned, most of them may suffer from anger and this requires that you deal with them in a particular way and not like any other child. For the workers to perform optimally, they need guidance and mentorship. They need to, for example, learn how to take care of children with special needs or take care of children suffering from HIV/AIDS.

In addition, some childcare workers come from unprivileged backgrounds, where they have unaccomplished dreams and goals. This may lead to them not being positive role models to the children, because a child who has a dream of, for instance, becoming a doctor and happens to share this with a childcare worker, it would more often than not be difficult to be supportive and believe in the child if you as a worker once had a dream of becoming a doctor and eventually failed to realise this dream. Moreover, others may push the child beyond their limits because they are trying to live vicariously through the child.

In the feedback report, the childcare workers mention having to deal with issues that they do not know how to deal with, which often leave them traumatised. These types of situations can be remedied by having professionals such as social workers and psychologists to mentor childcare workers. Bettmann et al. (2015, p. 71), indicate that "while caregivers describe a basic understanding of children's emotional and interpersonal needs, they detail a lack of training and support necessary to fully attend to these needs. Specifically, training for caregivers regarding children's basic attachment needs and the particular emotional needs of orphaned children is critical".

This analysis supports the theory that children in orphanages need extensive therapy because some of them might have had to take care of their ailing parents before they passed away or they have been exposed to trauma that no child should be exposed to. If the children receive therapy, it will reduce the number of behavioural problems they present, and this will reduce the cycle of trauma—from the children to the workers. And if the workers are equipped and trained, they will know how to deal with minor challenges they would encounter. This analysis also shows that orphanages need more support in terms of their basic needs. The government, sponsors and the community need to pull together and support orphanages as the children have been through enough already, they need not worry about where their next meal will come from (Nyamukapa et al., 2010).

In line with the supposition that COVID–19 has caused unexpected challenges for childcare workers' ability to perform their duties and children to fully reap the benefits of support received from childcare workers, Roy (2020) believes that the pandemic has forced institutional care such as correctional facilities and orphanages to restructure and find coping measures in this post-COVID era. The pandemic hit them particularly hard as they had to separate from the children, whereby both the children and care workers suffered from separation anxiety as they had not been away from one another for such an extensive period. The children also had to gain a sense of independence that they were not prepared for as they now had to mostly take care of themselves. In addition, they had no access to caregivers' mentoring and motivation as they relied on using technology to communicate, which most of them were not able to afford. The organisation Lefika need to resource the organisation with connectivity for the continuation of the relationship with

orphans. Orphans should also be equipped with skills by counsellors to deal with the trauma of separation. Orphans have a role in the community, and they need care to cope and thrive. Organisations like Lefika, need to empower the orphans with skills training, so that they can be able to strive and continue to succeed.

## 18. Stories of hope

Despite the challenges faced by childcare workers, in their daily operations as cited by (Manyerenyere, 2017) there are stories of hope and resilience shown from orphans who are part of the Lefika family. Accordingly, Makahane (2019) asserts that one might "borrow hope" from those individuals who already possess it. Therefore, the care workers search for hope from other care workers who exhibit behaviors consistent with hope. A total of 10 care workers were interviewed and the stories of hope were sourced from seven of the care workers who were former orphans of Lefika la Botshabelo.

Anonymous names are given to the participants with success stories of Lefika la Botshabelo OVC:

BM "Lefika la Botshabelo is like a second home to me, whereby a person wants to uplift ones' progress/skills such as strength and weaknesses to find a way of successes. Lefika taught me how to preserve, to learn to love, caring and how to solve challenges."

KM "I have been with Lefika for 9 years and I am currently doing Grade 11. Lefika taught me not to take other children for granted, to be a better person and to know that there are challenges other people are facing more than us. I was very young and shy when I joined Lefika and now I can participate with other children I am able to speak out when I have challenges."

RM "It has been 13 years since I was part of Lefika. I was assisted to finish school through financial support from Lefika. Lefika transformed my life I am now a childcare worker at Lefika helping other orphans just as I was assisted.

MP "I have been with Lefika for the past 12 years. Lefika has taught me resilience and a heart to care. I was taken in by Lefika after losing members of my family. I have a lot to express my gratitude to the organisation and I am currently employed in Lefika as a childcare worker. My story doesn't end here, Lefika cultivated a portion for me to give more life than I've ever imagined." The childcare worker is currently working as a language tutor helping children to write stories. He also assists children with reading and writing especially relating to their schoolwork. The work he does voluntary on Saturdays.

KG said that his journey started with Lefika 13 years ago when he was 8 years old. "I passed Grade 12 and I now work at the agricultural site of Lefika to plough vegetables for the families. I want to encourage children to start planting gardens at their homes by sharing skills of planting with them."

RM "I became a beneficiary of Lefika when I was in grade 11, I needed a family and Lefika was one I have completed my matric and working at the agricultural site. I assist children with Saturday lessons. I want to show love through giving back and prepare youth to preserve life struggle as I have been through that that myself".

QM "I joined Lefika 14 years ago. Through the guidance and support I got from Lefika, I was able to complete my diploma and I am now employed. During my free time I encourage young people who have been in my situation to go back to school.

The situation QM refers to means that he was also an orphan who needed care and scholastic support. Getting support and embracing the support from organisation like Lefika can emancipate

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one from being dependent on others if one goes to school and get education. Education is the key to empower a person to be independent.

Orphans have been through many disappointments, but through organization that cares for them, they can build up their patience and resilience. There is hope, despite their dire situation, as per stories shared by the childcare workers who are beneficiaries of Lefika, some have graduated and are employed. Some are employed by the organisation so that they can give back to the same organisation which has contributed to their well-being. My observation as the board member and my involvement with them since its inception in 2005 has shared a light on how the orphans as grown into responsible citizens. Their stories show that they have grown into responsible persons. According to their operation plan which covers the following pillars: 1, *Socio-economic independence, 2. Reliable responsible foster parents and children. 3. Qualified and Skilled Youth 4. Healthy and responsible community members 5. Civic responsibility 6. Food and nutrition security,* the organisation has a 5 year plan to address the strategic goals and ensure they respond to the targets set to improve the livelihood of orphans. The Director of the organisation gives report and present the success and challenges as per their strategic planning annually to the stakeholders and board members to update them on the progress done.

Every year at the beginning of December, the board members organise a Christmas party for the orphans and they share stories of hope and appreciation. There is one orphan who came from another country with no documentation and could not be accepted in any school. During their Christmas celebration she expressed her appreciation to Lefika and the director, "I am thankful that today am doing grade 6, I was able to be registered at school, Lefika gave me an opportunity to be a scholar, they assisted me in getting a birth certificate so that I can attend school. I am now confident that I will complete my education under the care of the Lefika and complete my studies so that I can help others." This is one evidence shared by the orphans indicating how proud and happy to be part of the puzzle of Lefika. Lefika has given her second chance in life.

The organisation received training from the college Agriculture whereby they receive seedlings to plant on their vegetable garden. The lecturers train them on how to plant vegetables, donated seedlings and assisted with system needed for irrigation purposes. The garden vegetables are meant to feed families of beneficiaries of Lefika. Some vegetables are sold to community members and the proceeds thereof will be used to buy food to feed the orphans when attending Saturday classes, where they are receiving extra lesson to improve on their school progress.

According to Lefika annual report, there is an ongoing capacity development of Child Care Workers, some are employed as educators, members of SGB, some did further studies. There is a programme for education support through mentoring students or orphans for academic excellence, which is facilitated by volunteers from universities of South Africa which also covers career choice and academic workshops to motivate them to continue with their studies.

## 19. Implications

Studies outlined by Helmerhorst et al. (2017) have highlighted the influence that training has on not only the performance of the childcare worker but also the positive interactions children are most likely to have with their peers. The outlook of personal and professional development was impacted by the challenges caused by COVID–19 in the training of childcare workers. This was because of a lack of resources such as personal computers and smart phones to engage in online training since COVID-19 set some limits on personal movements, and as a result, some of the care workers were unable to utilize devices of this nature. This study will have an influence on future research on the dynamics of the connection between those who work in childcare and their skill development when faced with unforeseen natural disasters. Orphans are a serious problem in several nations in sub-Saharan Africa, especially South Africa. The problem is widespread. We are hopeful that with the help of this study, we will be able to influence legislation about the required training for childcare employees. A policy of this kind may be implemented to aid the organization in becoming better prepared for any natural

disasters that may occur in the future. Thirdly, to ensure that the childcare professionals are functioning at their full potential, ongoing sessions of emotional counselling and debriefing should be explored.

## 20. Limitations

The study cannot be generalised, as it was conducted with only 10 childcare workers at the Lefika la Botshabelo Centre only. We cannot conclude the experiences of these 10 childcare workers to be the experience of all childcare workers in SA; however, stories as told by some orphans and childcare workers show that there is hope and in what the organisation is doing to vulnerable and orphaned children. The ethnic group consisted of black African people only, which limits the study to one racial group, which again affects the ability to generalise.

In addition, some other organisations whose primary mission is to assist underprivileged people were unable to continue helping for a variety of reasons, including a lack of financial resources and a concern of potential infections that could result in additional fatalities caused by COVID-19 (Molepo & Delport, 2015). This resulted in many more vulnerable youngsters being destitute because of the difficulties that were encountered. Based on the study and this report, we can conclude that further research is needed to establish what the position of other orphanages is and how they were impacted during the pandemic and how they remedied the situation. A bigger group of childcare workers must be interviewed to improve the generalisability of the study and ensure that the questions are asked on an individual basis to maintain the authenticity of individual experiences. The childcare centre in this case is in a rural area, which may have impacted the outcome of the study. Further research needs to be done in different backgrounds or settings, and the group should consist of different racial group.

## 21. Conclusion

As childcare work becomes increasingly central to vulnerable and orphaned children, it is important to understand the challenges that the profession is faced with.

COVID–19 has had an impact on how childcare workers fulfil their duties to the best of their ability. To create a truly beneficial environment for both the childcare workers and children, childcare workers require both training and supervision regularly. Furthermore, innovative ways in which childcare workers can continuously provide support services need to be increased. This also includes providing childcare workers with the opportunity to experience both personal and professional growth through consistent training and mental wellness programs. Be conscious of little ways they can support and do things for each other. They need to be affectionate, kind and respectful in their interactions. Be hopeful and optimistic, they will get through this by working together for the betterment of orphans. For future research into experiences of childcare workers at Lefika Orphaned and Vulnerable Children Centre, it should focus on establishing skills development for the continuity of the program.

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