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Educational challenges of 6- to 7-year-old children in children's homes: Ensuring the right to quality education

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Background: The 6- to 7-year-old children are in a delicate development phase. Children's homes are meant to provide and protect them. This age range is often sidelined in research, and challenges regarding fulfilling their rights in children's homes are often unknown.

Aim: This study explores the educational challenges experienced by the 6- to 7-year-olds in children's homes, focusing on the right to quality education. This study aims to provide implications for Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) targets.

Setting: The study was conducted in Zimbabwe's capital city, Harare. The researchers selected seven children's homes. A total of 42 children, aged 6 years to 7 years, took part in this study.

Methods: Data were collected by conducting individual semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Thematic data analysis was used.

Results: Findings indicated that inadequate academic resources, missed schoolwork because of the malfunctioning of the Basic Education Assistance Module, insufficient academic support from caregivers and inadequate technological devices hindered children's access to quality education.

Conclusion: The study revealed challenges, such as inadequate material and financial resources, which impeded the right to quality education for children in children's homes.

Contribution: Overall, regardless of who owned the children's homes, the findings showed that none of the selected children's homes in Harare were aligned with the targets of SDG 4. This study concludes that effective fulfilment of the right to quality education lies mainly in adequate funding.

Keywords: Constitution of Zimbabwe; early childhood; educational challenges; the right to quality education; Sustainable Development Goal 4.

Introduction

Access to quality education is a fundamental right of all children, including those residing in children's homes. According to Squire, King and Trinidad (2019), quality education includes access to affordable education, which provides a supportive environment. A supportive learning environment encompasses adequate resources and access to quality education, regardless of one's background and circumstances. Quality education should meet the needs of diverse learners (Squire et al. 2019), which implies that education should be inclusive, and no child should be discriminated against. Several policies have been introduced internationally and in Zimbabwe to meet children's rights. Early policies specified the right to basic education, and more recently, the right to quality education. The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948*, article 26, states that everyone has the right to free elementary education (United Nations 2015). A policy in Zimbabwe called the *Education Amendment Act* (2019), section 75, points out that all citizens have the right to basic state-funded education. A recent development was the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which specifies 'quality' education, which was not present in previous policies.

Six- to seven-year-old children are within the early childhood age range, which, according to Pewa and Mzimela (2024), refers to children from birth to 8 years old. Living in children's homes at such a tender age may often result in challenges in implementing their right to quality education. The impact of poor-quality education in children's homes affects intellectual development, emotional well-being and academic success (Cruz, Figueiredo & Almeida 2024). Cruz et al. (2024)

add that these issues can result in cognitive delays, increased behavioural problems and low academic performance, which may result in school dropouts. The essence of this study was to examine the challenges experienced by children between the ages of six and seven, focusing on fulfilling their right to quality education in seven children's homes in Harare, Zimbabwe.

Background

Zimbabwe's policies on children's rights borrow from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989). Section 81 of the consolidated Constitution of Zimbabwe (2023) aligns with article 27 of the UNCRC, which says that primary education should be free and compulsory (UNCRC 1989). The Constitution of Zimbabwe (1996) was repealed and replaced by the Constitution of Zimbabwe (2013), which was later consolidated in 2023. For the purposes of this study, the current consolidated 2023 Constitution will be referenced. A study conducted in Zimbabwe showed that primary education was neither free nor compulsory (Lemeyu & Chikutuma 2024). Nevertheless, when it comes to children living in children's homes, it is laudable that the Government of Zimbabwe pays for children's education through the government-initiated social protection programme called the Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM) (Baloyi, Pillay & Munongi 2025). This means all children living in children's homes must go to school. According to Kanengoni (2021), the Government of Zimbabwe introduced the BEAM in 2001 to cater for underprivileged children, including those in children's homes. This social justice perspective aligns with the goal of SDG 4 of providing quality education. However, a report by Maromo (2024) showed that the BEAM programme was ineffective because of financial challenges intensified by the failing economy of Zimbabwe. This means that the right to quality education is likely to be compromised.

Children's homes are places of safety for vulnerable children where their rights should be met. In Zimbabwe, a children's home is a registered alternative care provider, where children from disadvantaged backgrounds are looked after by trained personnel (Ringson 2023). According to the *Children's Act of 2001* (Chapter 5:06), all children's homes in Zimbabwe should be registered with the Ministry of Public Service Labour and Social Welfare (MoPSLSW). All seven children's homes used in this study were registered with the MoPSLSW.

Children's homes in Zimbabwe grew significantly in number in the 1990s in response to the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) or acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) pandemic, which left about 1 200 000 children orphaned (Powell et al. 2004). However, not all children in children's homes are orphaned, as some parents or guardians may be alive but not in a position to provide basic needs, including the right to quality education. Such parents and guardians may admit their children to a children's home. Children's homes were established to observe children's rights, including the right to quality education. However, according to the National Orphan Care Policy (Government of Zimbabwe 1999a), the admission of a child to a residential care home should be the last resort after the search for other forms of care has failed.

Fulfilling the right to quality education for early childhood children became popular in Zimbabwe after the Presidential Commission of Inquiry into Education and Training (Nziramasanga 1999b) found that this right was hindered because private schools' fees were excessive and beyond the reach of many Zimbabweans. Following the findings of the Commission of Inquiry into Education and Training in 1999, the Zimbabwean government policy published in the Secretary Circular 14 of 2004 ordered the attachment of early childhood A and early childhood B classes in government primary schools. According to Chinyenze (2024), some children living in children's homes go to nearby public and private schools, while others attend schools operated by the children's homes themselves. Six- to seven-year-old children in children's homes are a vulnerable group of children who are, in most cases, excluded from research studies in Zimbabwe (Baloyi et al. 2025), and this study aimed to address this gap by including them. Our study explored the challenges experienced by the 6- to 7-year-old children in line with fulfilling children's right to quality education.

The challenges experienced by young children in Zimbabwean primary schools are known. According to Chikutuma's (2013) study, challenges include inadequate infrastructure and knowledge of early childhood teaching strategies. Previous studies in children's homes in Zimbabwe excluded early childhood and focused on caregivers' challenges in executing their duties (Chinyenze 2024). Another study by Ringson (2023) examined the caregivers' perspectives on challenges children face in children's homes. Although several studies in Zimbabwe have investigated the right to quality education of early childhood children in primary schools, they have not included primary school children. For example, Chikutuma's (2013) study focused on evaluating the quality of early childhood development programmes in primary schools in Harare, Zimbabwe, with teachers as the primary participants. Chinhara and Kuyayama (2024) explored barriers to the accessibility of equitable quality education opportunities in early childhood classes situated in government primary schools. Our study attempted to address this research gap by including the 6- to 7-year-old children residing in children's homes. This research was conducted to explore the educational challenges experienced by children aged between six and seven living in children's homes. The focus was on fulfilling the child's right to quality education.

Right to basic education versus the right to quality education

The right to education can be explained in two ways: the right to basic education and the right to quality education. The right to basic education states that children should have

access to primary school education, which should be publicly funded and compulsory (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] 2024). This means that the right to basic education only ensures that children get literacy skills without necessarily considering the quality or equality. The right to education is essential, as it lays the foundation for the realisation of other important human rights (UNESCO 2024). This means that the right to education is a powerful tool in promoting other rights. For example, through education, individuals are enlightened on their rights, like the right to survival and good health care services.

Section 75 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe (2023) affirms that all Zimbabwean citizens are entitled to government-funded education. Despite what this policy says, education is not state funded in Zimbabwe as it is hindered by inadequate finances, which results in education not being free in some cases (Maromo 2024). Section 81d of the Constitution of Zimbabwe (2023) further states that children in alternative care placements in Zimbabwe should enjoy their rights, including the right to quality education. Hence, despite being raised in children's homes, children should be accorded the right to quality education.

A key principle of SDG 4 is equity, ensuring that all children are given equal opportunities to access quality education without segregation. According to Boeren (2019), the right to quality education goes beyond the right to basic education to the provision of adequate resources that allow children to progress to their fullest potential. Sustainable Development Goal 4 aims to provide inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all, including children in children's homes. However, achieving this goal in children's homes may be challenging because of financial constraints that limit access to vital educational resources, intended to promote quality education.

Educational challenges impeding the right to quality education for children residing in children's homes

Many educational challenges, such as inadequate resources, could jeopardise the right to quality education for children residing in children's homes. A Tanzanian study conducted by Vedasto, Charles and Sarwatt (2023) noted that inadequate basic educational materials, sportswear and trained personnel in the four orphanages in Dar es Salam region hindered the right to quality education. Untrained personnel may imply that the caregivers were not able to offer academic support to children in the sampled children's homes for the Tanzanian study. Notably, the Tanzanian research concentrated on every child under the age of 18 residing in children's homes, which may not provide specific findings pertaining to 6- to 7-year-old children. This current study was novel as it targeted a specific age group of children in the same early childhood developmental phase.

Another study in Ghana found that, in one SOS private children's home (SOS stands for the Latin phrase Societas Socialis, meaning Social Service Society), the state-owned facility devoted less attention to the daily operational costs and activities related to early childhood care (Lagbo 2014). This implies that inadequate assistance from the government affected children's right to quality education. This means that the children's homes were not adhering to the principles of SDG 4 on ensuring quality and equitable education. However, it is laudable that the Ghanaian study included 15 children in the early childhood age range, exploring policy implementation in selected children's homes.

A study by Anbar, Elewa and Abdel-Aziz (2023) in four children's homes in Cairo, Egypt, established that inadequate academic achievement caused psychological challenges like stress, depression and anxiety. These challenges affected the adolescents' concentration on their academic work, preventing them from participating in classrooms, which impacted their right to quality education (Anbar et al. 2023). The Egyptian study focused on older children and uncovered the educational challenges that affected adolescents in not only fulfilling their right to basic education but also quality education. By referring to the Egyptian studies, we acknowledge that our study builds upon them, as children residing in children's homes face unique educational barriers that can hinder their learning outcomes and overall development. However, our research fills a critical gap by exploring how specific challenges manifest for the 6- to 7-year-olds, where early interventions can have lasting positive effects. This study attempts to provide implications for practice in fulfilling their right to quality education in Harare, Zimbabwe.

Aims

This study aimed to investigate educational challenges experienced by the 6- to 7-year-old children living in children's homes in fulfilling their right to quality education. This study also aimed to surface the implications for practice in line with the target of SDG 4 by providing quality education for all learners. This investigation aimed to answer the following research questions:

- *What were the educational challenges experienced by the 6- to 7-year-old children living in children's homes in Harare?*
- *What were the implications of educational challenges experienced by the 6- to 7-year-old children towards fulfilling their right to quality education?*

Research methods and design

This study was informed by the social justice theory propounded by Rawls (1971). Ekmekci and Arda (2015) argue that social and economic disparities ought to be organised in a way that benefits society's least advantaged individuals.

The theory explains that a fair education system entails that all people have access to the same quality of education, irrespective of their background (Ekmekci & Arda 2015). Rawls (1971) found that disadvantaged groups should be provided with adequate facilities that promote equal access to ensure that fairness is realised. Rawls (1971) adds that justice should be the first virtue of social institutions; in this respect, children's homes are also social institutions, where justice for children should be promoted to ensure the right to quality education. Early childhood children living in children's homes come from various disadvantaged backgrounds (Mutiso et al. 2017), which may compromise their ability to access quality education. The theory applies to this study as it stipulates that the right to education may be viewed as a way of reducing inequality by providing that all people, particularly marginalised groups, are granted equal education opportunities. This theory is vital as it also acknowledges the principle of SDG 4 on quality education.

Study design

A qualitative methodology was adopted in this research to explore individuals' experiences within a real-life context (Cypress 2021). This study was informed by the social constructivist paradigm, which originates from the perspective that realities are socially constructed through social experiences (Pilarska 2021). The social constructivist paradigm permitted the researchers to examine educational challenges experienced by the 6-to-7-year-old children living in the sampled children's homes, aiming to fulfil children's right to receive quality education. A multiple case study approach involving seven children's homes was employed. This design enabled us to obtain rich data from different case studies (Gustafsson 2017), including the participants' educational challenges experienced in children's homes.

Setting

The study took place in seven registered children's homes in Harare in 2021. Harare is the capital city of Zimbabwe and is a metropolitan province with a population of around 1 603 201 (World Population Review 2024). There are 24 registered children's homes in Harare. Five adopted the household unit style, and two used the dormitory style. In a household unit, children stay in a family set up with an anticipated number of 10 children cared for by one caregiver in a house (Government of Zimbabwe 2010). In a dormitory style, a larger number of children live in a large room and are under the care of different caregivers who take turns to cater to the well-being of children (Ringson 2023). One home was state owned, three were under religious organisations and the other three were owned by non-governmental organisations (see Table 1).

Sampling

Purposive sampling was employed in this study as it targeted participants with the appropriate information to accomplish the goal of the study and answer the research questions (Campbell et al. 2020). The sample consisted of 42 6- to 7-year-old black African children (23 girls and 19 boys). Children had to have good oral skills and were tested before the study by asking them simple oral questions on the video that was played.

TABLE 1: Summary description of seven children's homes.

Code of the home	Ownership	Style	Children's homes' status on owning a primary school
A	Government of Zimbabwe	Dormitory	Own a school
B	NGO	Household	None
C	Religious organisation	Household	None
D	NGO	Household	None
E	NGO	Household	Own a school
F	Religious organisation	Dormitory	Own a school
G	NGO	Household	Own a school

NGO, Non-governmental organisation.

Data collection

Researchers obtained data through semi-structured personal interviews and focus groups. A semi-structured interview is an exploratory data-collection method that is based on asking pre-planned questions (Naz, Gulab & Aslam 2022). The questions should be in line with participants' experiences and opinions regarding a certain topic (Eppich, Gormley & Teunissen 2019). This was a suitable method as questions were prepared before the interviews, which helped the researchers to solicit relevant information (Naz et al. 2022). Forty-two semi-structured interviews were conducted in ChiShona, their mother tongue, because the participants conversed better in that language. ChiShona was also the medium of instruction at schools as espoused by the language policy in Zimbabwe that children in early grades (Grades 1 to 3) should be taught in their mother tongue or the indigenous language used in the community (Government of Zimbabwe 2019). According to Ponizovsky-Bergelson et al. (2019), researchers in early childhood education should employ child-friendly strategies and methods that encourage and facilitate more open and authentic self-expression by young participants. In this study, one-on-one interviews with 6- to 7-year-old children incorporated playful strategies and approaches, including the use of technology to help children identify elements in video clips, the integration of puppets and conducting interviews in familiar environments to ensure comfort and engagement.

Seven focus group discussions were conducted. According to the US Department of Health and Human Services Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2022), a focus group is a directed group interview of about 6 people to 12 people with common interests. This was applicable in our study as our focus groups consisted of participants who resided in a children's home. Focus groups with the children were carefully planned to promote openness and a flow of communication as recommended by Vogl, Schmidt and Kapella (2023). Similarly, when interviewing the 6- to 7-year-old children, playful approaches were incorporated,

including using introductory activities like singing, dancing and puppets. These activities promoted a relaxed environment for children to communicate their views openly.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis of the data was conducted using Clarke and Braun's (2017) six-phase framework. In the first step, we familiarised ourselves with the data. In line with Clarke and Braun (2017), interviews were audio recorded, and the recordings were transcribed for analysis. The first researcher translated the transcripts into English. The second researcher checked the transcriptions because ChiShona was the mother language of these two researchers. In step 2, we identified codes that appeared interesting and meaningful to us. In step 3, we identified themes that came from recurring responses from the participants. In step 4, we reviewed the themes by removing themes with inadequate data. This was followed by step 5, where we defined and named the four themes. In the final step, we produced a report relating the themes to address the research questions and discussing the findings based on the literature and the theoretical framework.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was initially obtained from the University of Johannesburg Ethics Committee (reference number: SEM-1-2021-048) with further permissions granted in Zimbabwe, the country of study. The MoPSLSW in Zimbabwe permitted the authors to conduct research in Harare's children's homes. Additional permission was granted by the Child Protection Society and the children's homes' head offices, as requested by some directors. Before the interviews, the directors signed the consent forms on behalf of the children. All the participants were assured confidentiality. To ensure anonymity, the participants were given codes. Children were coded from child 1 to 6, for example, E1FA meant child 1 from residential care Home A, while E6FA meant child 6 from residential care Home A.

Results and discussion

The children in this study indicated educational challenges they experienced in fulfilling their right to quality education. These included insufficient academic resources, inadequate academic support and missing out on schoolwork. These are presented and discussed further in the text.

Theme 1: Insufficient academic resources

Children in this study indicated that insufficient academic resources compromised the right to quality education. This was caused by a drop in donations of stationery and financial challenges caused by the country's failing economy. This was noted in both the privately-owned and public children's homes. Child EF2A confirmed in the individual interview:

> 'There were people who used to bring us books, crayons, pencils and sunrise readers but now they are no longer coming, our mother always tells us that donors, who used to help us are also facing money problems.' (female, grade 2, 6 years old)

Child E2FE pointed out:

> 'They used to come with plenty of exercise books and we used to have plenty books in our study room but now they are no longer coming.' (male, grade 1, 6 years old)

In the focus group at Home A, child E4FA said:

> 'I normally write notes while at school … I do not have any textbooks to read as the people who used to give us textbooks are no longer coming to give us ... I read my notes at home.' (female, grade 2, 7 years old)

Another child E5FA said:

> 'Last year when I was in Grade 1, I had all the Sunrise readers but now in Grade 2, I have none since our donors are no longer donating the books for us.' (female, grade 2, 7 years old)

The findings above indicate inadequate stationery because of a decrease in donations from the community, which negatively affected the right to quality education. This contradicts the expectations of SDG 4, which requires adequate resources to be provided to children for quality education. This finding corroborates Ullah, Alam and Munir's (2022) study, which found that in Pakistan, selected orphanages faced shortages of stationery owing to poverty in the surrounding communities. Our study added insight that home ownership did not necessarily determine the implementation of children's rights policies. Although children had the right to education as provided in the Constitution of Zimbabwe (2023) section 81, which states in the Bill of Rights that children have the right to education, the quality was below the expectations of the SDG 4 requirements. As children's homes rely on state funding and donations, and given the prevailing economic situation in Zimbabwe, this finding highlights the need for homes to create a wider financial resource base. This could help avoid shortages of basic resources that are critical in providing children with quality education.

Our findings did not reflect the social justice concept of fairness and an equitable education system, which should ensure that everyone has access to the same quality of education (eds. Chapman & Ainscow 2021). While other advantaged children did not lack stationery, our participants were disadvantaged by living in children's homes, indicating inadequate social justice. This reinforces the social justice theory, which states that disadvantaged groups of people often suffer injustice (Rawls 1971), indicating that the children's homes were still far from achieving the SDG 4 goal of providing quality education for all children. Stationery is a critical resource that enables learners to enjoy quality education. The insufficient supply experienced by participants implies that they were deprived of participating in school activities, which required stationery. In this view, the

researchers argue that for the principles of SDG 4 to be achieved, educational resources must be made available to all learners. Therefore, depriving learners of basic items such as stationery undermines the goal of SDG 4, which is to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all.

Theme 2: Missing out on schoolwork owing to a malfunctioning basic education assistance module

The outcomes of the study indicated that children were missing out on schoolwork because of the malfunctioning of BEAM, which was meant to pay for the children's school fees. In the case of children's homes that did not own schools, children indicated that they did not always have access to education because they were sent back home from school for non-payment of school fees. The BEAM was affected by the inadequate funds from the government. This was supported in the individual interviews with children when child E1FC said:

> 'Sometimes we would be sent back home from school because of failure to pay the fees, my teacher said that the BEAM did not pay for our school fees.' (male, grade 2, 7 years old)

E3FD confirmed:

> 'In some cases, we are sent back home because the School Development Committee member informed l and other peers from the home that BEAM did not pay for our school fees, because the government has no money.' (female, grade 2, 7 years old)

Evidence of children being sent home owing to non-payment of school fees was also common in the focus group discussions. E2FB from Home B said:

> 'Some of the children from the community make fun of us, especially when the teacher sends us back home to collect the school fees which was not paid by the BEAM.' (female, grade 2, 7 years old)

This finding confirms Chikoko and Mwapaura's (2024) study in Zimbabwe, which found that social protection programmes were affected by the failing economy. The ineffectiveness of the BEAM negatively influenced the right to quality education, as children would lose learning time when they were sent home because of the non-payment of school fees. In some African countries like South Africa and Namibia, governments fund the children in children's homes through allocated social cash transfers (Valombola & Omomowo 2024). However, in Zimbabwe, it may not be feasible for the government to fund children's homes as the economy remains poor. It can therefore be argued that while children's homes in Harare were striving to provide the right to basic education, the right to quality education was compromised. This entails the fact that the SDG 4 aspect of quality education was not realised for the sampled children. Our study is significant as it shows that drafting SDG goals is not enough. There is a need for financial back-up to make the SDG 4 goals feasible, especially for underprivileged children living in children's homes. The social justice theory states that the right to education is a way to reduce inequality among marginalised groups of people (Rawls 1971). Considering the findings of this study, inequalities may be difficult to reduce for children living in children's homes as proposed by this theory.

Theme 3: Inadequate academic support from caregivers

Findings showed that children were not helped academically by the caregivers, as they did not help them with their homework or any academic work. Children indicated that the caregivers did not always understand the work and were sometimes busy with other things. This was supported by E1FA, who said in an individual interview:

> 'Our mother [*caregiver*] does not help me with homework; when I ask her, she says she is busy with her work and I should ask older children in our dormitory.' (female, grade 1, 6 years old)

E3FD said:

> 'My mother says she does not know the content; when l request for her to help me with my homework, she says l should ask from my peers in our house and sometimes she says that she is busy, but she will be on WhatsApp.' (female, grade 2, 7 years old)

In the focus group with children at Home A, E4FA said:

> 'We are helped by our older peers as our mothers say that they do not understand the homework and she also say my schoolwork is difficult for her.' (female, grade 2, 7 years old)

At Home D, E2FD explained:

> 'We help each other as children with homework or schoolwork … our mothers in some cases say they are busy on WhatsApp and sometimes they complain that the work is hard for them.' (male, grade 1, 6 years old)

Inadequate extra academic support from the caregivers potentially affects the quality of education that the children receive. Although the older children may have done the lower grades' work, competence to help the younger children cannot always be guaranteed. This kind of assistance does not guarantee the fulfilment of the provision of quality education as aimed at by SDG 4 on quality education. This is because children usually need extra help at home, which can be given by caregivers or private tutors. This finding concurs with a study in Lesotho by Mabaso (2023), which found that some caregivers did not help children with their homework. Similar findings in Zimbabwe and Lesotho show the need to address this educational challenge faced by children residing in children's homes. This study provided insight into the fact that caregivers in selected children's homes not only lacked the knowledge to assist children, but children also complained that they were busy on WhatsApp.

Inadequate provision of extra tutoring to assist these children after school shows that limited social justice was evident in the unequal distribution of services, which failed to ensure equality for disadvantaged groups (eds. Chapman & Ainscow 2021). Whereas the advantaged

children may have the luxury of enjoying extra tuition services, children in this sample did not. This compromised the aims of the SDG 4 goal of promoting equitable quality education and highlights the children's educational challenge.

Theme 4: Inadequate technological gadgets

Results of this study indicated that participants lacked technological devices in the children's homes. As this study was conducted during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, most school tasks were expected to be done online. All the 6- to 7 -year-old children in different homes experienced challenges as they did not have the required technology, which would have made it possible to be part of the virtual learning. This was confirmed in individual interviews by E3FF, who said:

> 'I do not have a cell phone; our teacher sends work to my mother's cell phone, but it is difficult to share one cell phone because we are many.' (male, grade 1, 6 years old)

E2FG said:

> 'Some of the work that we are given at school requires us to research on the computer but we do not have one, so l ask for a cell phone from my older peers who stay in our dormitory but in most cases, they do not have data or they refuse.' (male, grade 1, 6 years old)

In the focus group with children at Home C, E3FC raised an important point:

> 'I do not have a cell phone … my sponsor wanted to buy one for me but my mother refused saying that only older children are allowed to have cell phones.' (female, grade 2, 7 years old)

At Home D, EF4D:

> 'We only have one computer that is in the reception room; however, we just play games … we cannot search information because it does not have access to the internet … it is difficult to do our homework.' (female, grade 1, 6 years old)

The finding contravenes SDG 4, which focuses on delivering inclusive and fair, quality education. Children in this study were excluded because they did not have the technology for online learning. The children did not realise equitable quality education as they struggled to keep up with their academic work. Our findings do not agree with those of a Malaysian study, where 67% of the children had technological gadgets and only 33% did not (Unplagan et al. 2018). Although 33% is still quite a large number, children in our study were worse off. The findings in our study were expected, considering the economic demise in the country. According to Adarkwah's (2021) study, integrating information communication and technology in learning at every school level embraces quality education for all. Denying children access to technology education compromised the quality of education provided, given the way education has transformed in the past few years. Findings of the current study do not align with the principle of social justice theory of equal distribution of resources that aims to provide equal opportunities to the underprivileged group of people to compete with their counterparts (eds. Chapman & Ainscow 2021). This finding indicates that equitable opportunities, which promote quality education as expected by the theory and SDG 4, may be difficult for children living in disadvantaged homes.

Strengths and limitations of the study

Various strengths were noted in this study. These included using the children's home language during data collection. This eliminated potential language barriers as they were able to express their views clearly. Our study gave the children an opportunity to air their educational challenges. The limitation of our study was the fact that it was confined to selected homes, which means that findings are not generalisable to other homes. However, the sample provided valuable information on the educational challenges experienced by the participants in fulfilling their right to quality education in the context of the sampled homes. These findings could inform policies and intervention programmes.

Implications for practice

There are several implications for practice in children's homes. Given that the government is failing in funding the BEAM, which hinders the right to quality education, our study may open avenues for children's homes not to rely solely on the government for finances, but try other avenues like finding more donors locally and internationally. The children indicated that caregivers had challenges in helping them academically because of inadequate knowledge; hence, they were deprived of additional academic support to realise the right to quality education. This further implies that while other children had extra support from their caregivers or private tuition and could catch up on schoolwork, the sampled children struggled with their academic work. This compromised the overall quality of education for these children, as their sources of support could not provide quality support. Inadequate technological gadgets imply that, in practice, children were behind in their education as they might not have been able to participate in virtual learning or complete tasks sent through virtual platforms. In practice, this implies that the right to quality education was compromised.

Recommendations

Results of this study showed that children were not receiving academic support from caregivers; hence, our study recommends that directors make random visits to observe how caregivers are assisting children with their academic work. Staff development workshops are recommended to educate caregivers on the updated curriculum in Zimbabwe to ensure that they can competently assist children after school. Our study also recommends that children's homes should collaborate with local teachers or hire part-time tutors to enhance learning support in the homes. Our study recommends that for children's homes to provide adequate stationery, which is an expectation of

SDG 4, they need to try to source funds from local and international donors. Another key recommendation is that children's homes should acquire the needed technology to assist children in keeping abreast of educational advancements. They should invest in technology, such as devices, internet access and digital literacy training to help the 6- to 7-year-old children keep up with modern education. Achieving this requires collaboration among stakeholders to ensure educational equity and access to technology in line with SDG 4 and their constitutional rights.

Conclusion

The findings reveal that children aged 6 years to 7 years in children's homes experienced challenges which impeded their access to quality education. The SDG 4 goal of providing quality and equitable education to children was therefore not realised in these homes. The findings indicated that the right to quality education appears not to have been met in Harare children's homes because of the educational challenges explored earlier in the text. The study shows that adopting principles from the 1989 UNCRC does not guarantee the fulfilment of children's right to quality education in some countries, such as Zimbabwe, because of practical challenges encountered during implementation. This is despite children's homes being places where children's rights, like the right to quality education, are expected to be met. The findings are significant as they have international implications for children's homes, despite being carried out in Harare, Zimbabwe.

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Authors' contributions

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Data availability

The data that supports the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, B.T.B upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

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