

Hands that Help, Hearts that Care: Work Experiences of Social Welfare Officers of Children in Conflict with the Law (CICL) Diversion Program

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Publication history: Received: April 26, 2026; Revised: May 10, 2026; Accepted: May 24, 2026

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Abstract

This study explored the work experiences of Social Welfare Officers implementing the Children in Conflict with the Law (CICL) Diversion Program in Leyte, Philippines. Anchored on Team Performance Theory, Competence Motivation Theory, and Self-Efficacy Theory, the study examined how implementers experienced the program, addressed implementation problems, and expressed aspirations for improvement. A qualitative phenomenological research design was used, involving nine Social Welfare Officers from Ormoc City, Baybay City, and Maasin City. Data were gathered through an interview guide with open-ended questions and were analyzed using Colaizzi's method and thematic analysis. The findings generated ninety significant statements, twelve cluster themes, and ten major themes. Positive experiences were reflected in the themes Better Version and Avenue of Hope, while negative experiences included Reluctant Family, Social Stigma, and Delicate Family Dynamics. To address these challenges, the officers relied on Counseling as its Best, Skill-Building Programs, and Desired Result. Their aspirations focused on Additional Incentives and Being a Champion of Hope. The study concludes that Social Welfare Officers play a vital role in CICL rehabilitation, diversion, intervention, and reintegration, but their effectiveness is affected by limited resources, heavy workloads, family-related challenges, stigma, and coordination gaps. The study supports SDG 16 on Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions, SDG 3 on Good Health and Well-Being, SDG 4 on Quality Education, and SDG 17 on Partnerships for the Goals. Its sustainability impact lies in strengthening child-centered justice, community reintegration, institutional support systems, and governance mechanisms for restorative juvenile justice.

Keywords: Children in Conflict with the Law, Community Reintegration, Diversion Program, Juvenile Justice, Rehabilitation, Restorative Justice, Social Welfare Officers, Thematic Analysis, Work Experiences

1. Introduction

Children in Conflict with the Law (CICL) remain a major concern in child protection, juvenile justice, and social welfare practice. The issue requires a justice system that protects children's rights while promoting rehabilitation, reintegration, and community-based support rather than punishment. In the Philippines, Republic Act 9344 established a restorative justice framework through diversion, intervention, and reintegration programs; however, implementation remains uneven, especially in local and resource-limited settings. This study focuses on the work experiences of Social Welfare Officers implementing the CICL Diversion Program in Leyte, Philippines, with emphasis on their challenges, coping strategies, and aspirations for program improvement.

Children in Conflict with the Law (CICL) are a continuing global concern because their cases involve justice, rehabilitation, child protection, and community responsibility. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2021) emphasizes that child-friendly justice must prioritize rehabilitation, reintegration, and children's rights instead of punitive responses. Countries such as Norway and the Netherlands have used restorative justice and community-based programs that resulted in lower recidivism and better reintegration outcomes (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2020). Similarly, New Zealand's Family Group Conferences allow families and communities to participate in resolving juvenile cases, reflecting a rights-based and restorative approach (Connolly & MacKenzie, 1998). However, juvenile justice systems continue to face structural challenges. In countries such as the United States and Brazil, poverty, racial disparities, and dependence on incarceration continue to affect children's justice experiences. Brocklehurst (2006) explains that children's experiences of conflict are shaped by broader international relations and policy systems. These realities show the connection among policy, social services, and community participation, and they highlight the need for well-funded, culturally sensitive, and community-centered responses to Children in Conflict with the Law [CICL] (Carbonell et al., 2023).

The literature emphasizes restorative justice, social work intervention, family participation, and community-based rehabilitation as central to CICL programming. Historically, juvenile courts and probation services shifted juvenile justice from punishment toward rehabilitation (Roberts, 2004). Diversion programs later became an important mechanism for keeping children away from formal court proceedings, although their success depends on how practitioners interpret, apply, and sustain diversion strategies. Potter and Kakar (2002) note that juvenile court decisions are shaped not only by law but also by practitioners' values, available resources, and perceptions of a child's capacity for rehabilitation. Social workers are central actors in this process. Republic Act No. 4373, or the Social Work Law, recognizes social work as a profession committed to social justice, quality of life, and the development of individuals and communities. Literature shows that social workers handling CICL cases face emotional, behavioral, legal, and institutional challenges. Kilkelly et al. (2023) found that social workers working with CICL experience emotional strain because of the intensity of their work and limited resources. William (2019) also emphasizes that social workers must balance legal mandates, ethical obligations, and the best interests of the child despite systemic limitations. Bride (2007) found a high prevalence of secondary traumatic stress among social workers, while Adams et al. (2006) highlight compassion fatigue and psychological distress in high-stakes social work fields such as juvenile justice. The literature also stresses the need for professional development and support systems. Greene and Kropf (2014) argue that social workers' specialized training allows them to work effectively with CICL and marginalized groups, while also contributing to individual rehabilitation and systemic reform. Greene and Kropf (2014) further emphasize that stronger support systems, professional development, and psychosocial assistance improve both client outcomes and the well-being of social workers. Restorative justice is also strongly supported in the literature. Donato (2025) found that punitive measures may worsen delinquent behavior, while restorative approaches support healing, accountability, and reintegration. Susilowati (2018) emphasizes the importance of social workers' knowledge of legal frameworks, child development, and trauma-informed care. Prabasini (2021) shows that combining legal protection with psychosocial support results in more holistic rehabilitation. Arjunan (2013) highlights the value of family reunification and community-based intervention in reducing recidivism and supporting long-term reintegration. Studies also identify implementation barriers. Atianzar (2002) found that resistance from CICL participants and parents is a major challenge in intervention programs. Fabre et al. (2016) examined CICL intervention programs through sustainable development, emphasizing child development, family engagement, and multi-level collaboration with government agencies and partners. Yazid (2023) highlights the emotional burden experienced by social workers in CICL cases and the need for counseling, peer support, and institutional recognition. Banzon (2023) emphasizes the importance of understanding CICL narrative identities, while Urbano et al. (2023) found that holistic diversion programs may promote personal growth through vocational training, sports, and spiritual development, although children may still experience adjustment difficulties that require individualized and continuous reintegration support.

Globally, CICL remain a pressing concern. The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) Statistical Briefing Book (2022) reported that approximately 424,300 minors were arrested in the United States in 2020, showing that juvenile offending remains a persistent issue despite declining figures. Angelöw and Psouni (2025) emphasize that children have developmental needs distinct from adults, requiring age-appropriate legal responses. The 2019 U.N. Global Study on Children Deprived of Liberty estimated that between 160,000 and 250,000 children were detained on any given day in 2018, with up to 410,000 experiencing detention within the year. International models provide relevant insights. South Africa's Child Justice Act No. 75 of 2008 established a separate framework for child offenders and formally introduced diversion, restorative justice, and developmental assessment (Republic of South Africa, 2009). Sloth-Nielsen (2004) notes that this framework promotes age-appropriate and development-sensitive treatment of children. Steyn (2005) also documented community-based diversion and reintegration strategies, while Steyn (2010) emphasized that diversion programs should be aligned with child development principles to become cost-effective and rehabilitative. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child has also influenced child-friendly justice reforms. Forde (2021) emphasizes children's meaningful participation and best interests in justice processes, while Frazier and Cochran (1986) show that diversion policies grounded in labeling theory may reduce the harms of formal court intervention. In the Philippines, Republic Act 9344, or the Juvenile Justice and Welfare Act of 2006, established a restorative legal framework for CICL. The law requires diversion programs, child-sensitive legal procedures, and interventions aligned with international child protection standards. However, implementation remains inconsistent. A 2022 Senate hearing reported that many Local Government Units (LGUs) still lack fully operational Bahay Pag-asa rehabilitation centers and trained personnel, while limited funding, poor inter-agency coordination, and low public awareness continue to affect the application of RA 9344 (Philippine Daily Inquirer, 2022). The law also raised the minimum age of criminal responsibility to 15 years old and introduced the principle of discernment for children aged 15 to 18 (Republic Act No. 9344, 2006). The Supreme Court of the Philippines (2024) further clarified the application of discernment. National agencies such as the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), Department of Justice (DOJ), and Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG) promote psychosocial support, family counseling, skills training, and community reintegration. In practice, however, the gap between national policy and local implementation remains significant, especially in rural and resource-limited areas. In Eastern Visayas, particularly Leyte and Southern Leyte, some urban LGUs have coordinated with DSWD and other offices, while many rural municipalities still face logistical and financial constraints. According to a 2023 Philippine Information Agency report, some LGUs have appointed youth welfare officers and started community-based

initiatives, but these often lack sustainability because of limited support, insufficient training, and weak inter-agency collaboration (Philippine Information Agency [PIA], 2023). At the local level, municipalities such as Palo, Tanauan, and Alangalang show uneven capacity in addressing CICL cases, especially in access to shelters, legal aid, and psychological services. Southern Leyte has shown progress through the construction of Region VIII's first Bahay Pag-Asa Standard facility in Barangay Bilibol, Maasin City, which is intended to provide educational, psychosocial, and residential services consistent with restorative justice principles (Orias, 2023). In Baybay City, the Local Management Planning Team developed a Comprehensive Local Juvenile Intervention Program, supported by the allocation of 1% of the Internal Revenue Allotment under RA 9344 and RA 10630. In Maasin City, City Ordinance No. 13-219-17 protects children's rights, including protection from torture, unjust detention, and denial of legal support. The DILG Memorandum Circular No. 2009-124 and Executive Order No. 07-20 further support local mechanisms for diversion and intervention.

This study is anchored on Team Performance Theory of Tuckman (1965), supported by Competence Motivation Theory of White (1959) and Self-Efficacy Theory of Bandura (1977). Tuckman (1965) explains that teams undergo developmental stages as they move toward effective collaboration and performance. The model originally included forming, storming, norming, and performing, with adjourning later added to account for the completion of team tasks (Bonebright, 2010). In the context of CICL diversion implementation, this theory explains how Social Welfare Officers work with other stakeholders, including justice personnel, LGUs, families, and community partners. Effective implementation depends on role clarity, trust, communication, conflict management, and adaptive leadership. Competence Motivation Theory of White (1959) explains the internal drive of individuals to master their environment, demonstrate skills, and experience effectiveness. This theory is relevant because Social Welfare Officers handle emotionally difficult and complex CICL cases that require professional competence, persistence, and continuous learning. White (1959) also notes that support and success reinforce motivation, while repeated failure and lack of support may weaken engagement. Harter (1978) extended this theory by emphasizing the role of social feedback in shaping perceived competence. In this study, competence motivation helps explain how Social Welfare Officers sustain commitment despite limited resources and challenging family or community situations. Self-Efficacy Theory of Bandura (1977) explains how belief in one's ability influences motivation, behavior, persistence, and achievement. In CICL diversion work, Social Welfare Officers need confidence in handling sensitive cases, coordinating with stakeholders, counseling children and families, and addressing barriers to rehabilitation. Bandura (1977) identifies mastery experiences as a major source of self-efficacy, while Kolbe (2009) emphasizes the role of confidence in motivation and perseverance. Redmond (2010) further notes that self-efficacy is dynamic and influenced by both internal assessment and external conditions. Together, these theories provide a framework for understanding the teamwork, motivation, and resilience of Social Welfare Officers in implementing the CICL Diversion Program.

The literature shows that national and international studies have examined CICL programs, restorative justice, and juvenile rehabilitation, but there remains limited qualitative evidence on how CICL diversion programs are experienced by frontline implementers in less urbanized settings such as Leyte. Most existing studies focus on legislation, institutional systems, or quantitative outcomes, while the perspectives of Social Welfare Officers, barangay officials, volunteers, and other implementers are often underrepresented. This gap is important because frontline workers directly manage the emotional, operational, and social realities of CICL cases. The rationale of the study is strengthened by local conditions in Leyte, where CICL cases are associated with poverty, broken family structures, substance abuse, and school dropout. McLaughlin (2025) links family instability and economic hardship to juvenile crime. Repeat offenses also suggest gaps in follow-up services, reintegration, and sustained support, while stigma against CICL may weaken restorative justice goals (Yang et al., 2015). Noviello (2022) emphasizes that early intervention and structured rehabilitation are needed to prevent reoffending and address the causes of delinquent behavior. This study therefore addresses the gap by exploring the work experiences of Social Welfare Officers implementing the CICL Diversion Program in Leyte, Philippines. It focuses on their experiences, the ways they address implementation problems, and their aspirations for improving the program. The study contributes practical insights for policymakers, DSWD, LGUs, barangay officials, families, communities, and future researchers by documenting the realities of local implementation and the support needed to strengthen restorative juvenile justice.

This study aligns most directly with SDG 16 – Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions because it examines child-sensitive justice, diversion, restorative justice, and the institutional role of Social Welfare Officers in protecting the rights and dignity of CICL. Its focus on rehabilitation, reintegration, and alternatives to punitive measures supports stronger and more humane justice systems. The study also aligns with SDG 3 – Good Health and Well-Being because CICL diversion involves psychosocial support, counseling, rehabilitation, and protection from emotional and social harm. The literature also highlights the emotional strain, secondary traumatic stress, compassion fatigue, and psychological distress experienced by social workers, making worker well-being part of sustainable service delivery (Bride, 2007; Adams et al., 2006; Yazid, 2023). It further supports SDG 4 – Quality Education because CICL programs include skills training, personal development, and learning opportunities that help children redirect their behavior and improve their future prospects. It also supports SDG 17 – Partnerships for the Goals because effective diversion requires collaboration among DSWD, DOJ,

DILG, LGUs, barangay officials, families, communities, and other stakeholders. The need for multi-level collaboration is emphasized in studies on child development, family engagement, and government partnership (Fabre et al., 2016).

This study contributes to policy and governance sustainability by examining how national child protection and juvenile justice policies are translated into local practice. It provides insights that may guide LGUs, DSWD, and other agencies in improving training, resource allocation, inter-agency coordination, and support mechanisms for CICL diversion implementation. It also contributes to social and community sustainability by emphasizing rehabilitation, family participation, community reintegration, and stigma reduction. Since CICL cases involve family dynamics, poverty, community attitudes, and institutional support, the study connects criminal justice, social work, psychology, public administration, education, and community development. Its multidisciplinary value lies in showing that juvenile justice cannot be addressed through legal intervention alone; it requires coordinated social services, child-centered care, professional support, and community participation. Finally, the study supports institutional sustainability by highlighting the work experiences and needs of Social Welfare Officers. Strengthening their competence, motivation, self-efficacy, mental health, and professional support systems can improve the consistency and quality of CICL diversion services. In this sense, the study contributes not only to the welfare of children but also to the resilience of the professionals and institutions responsible for restorative juvenile justice.

2. Material and methods

2.1 Research Design

The study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to examine and understand the lived work experiences of Social Welfare Officers involved in the CICL Diversion Program in Leyte, Philippines. The design allowed the researcher to interpret the meanings of participants' experiences and obtain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. In-depth interviews were used to describe, elaborate, and demonstrate the participants' perspectives, allowing the researcher to return to the concrete aspects of experience (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological inquiry relies on interviewing individuals who have directly experienced a specific phenomenon, with attention to interview characteristics, participant selection criteria, ethical considerations, and interview procedures (Moustakas, 1994). This approach was appropriate because it enabled the researcher to explore the essential structures and themes of lived experience by using participants' reflections to understand the deeper meaning of the phenomenon (Finlay, 2008).

2.2 Locale of the Study

The study was conducted in Leyte, the largest of the six provinces of Eastern Visayas. Leyte is located near Samar, Cebu, and Bohol, and is bounded by Carigara Bay, Leyte Gulf, Camotes Sea, and Southern Leyte. The province is composed of forty municipalities and two cities, Ormoc and Baybay, and has five congressional districts and 1,503 barangays. The study specifically involved Social Welfare Officers from Ormoc City, Baybay City, and Maasin City. Ormoc is a highly urbanized coastal port city and serves as an economic, cultural, commercial, and transportation center of Western Leyte. Baybay is located on the western coast of Leyte and is one of the largest cities in Eastern Visayas in terms of land area. Maasin City serves as the commercial and religious center of Southern Leyte and the southwestern part of Leyte Island.

2.3 Respondents of the Study

The participants of the study were nine Social Welfare Officers involved in the CICL Diversion Program in Leyte. Three informants came from Ormoc City, three from Baybay City, and three from Maasin City. All informants were active members of the Department of Social Welfare and Development during the time of the interview and were selected because of their direct involvement in the implementation of CICL-related social work practices. Their participation provided relevant insights, perspectives, and experiences regarding the implementation of the CICL Diversion Program.

2.4 Sample and Sampling Procedure

The study involved nine informants selected based on criteria aligned with the objectives of the research. The participants were required to be between 30 and 50 years old and to have at least three years of active and continuous service in their role. The thesis describes the use of a systematic approach in participant selection and identifies the informants as Social Welfare Officers directly connected to the CICL Diversion Program. Ethical considerations were observed during selection, including the participants' willingness, commitment, and interest in contributing to the study.

2.5 Research Instrument

The researcher used an Interview Guide composed of open-ended questions to explore the work experiences of Social Welfare Officers implementing the CICL Diversion Program in Leyte. The interviews were digitally recorded, and the audio recordings were promptly transcribed to preserve the accuracy and essence of the participants' responses. Data collection continued until saturation was reached, meaning no new information or insights were emerging. The guide focused on three major areas: the informants' experiences in implementing the CICL Diversion Program, the ways they addressed problems encountered during implementation, and their aspirations for improving the program. Member

checking, peer debriefing, and consultation were used to enhance the validity, credibility, and trustworthiness of the gathered data.

2.6 Data Gathering Procedure

The researcher followed a step-by-step data gathering process. Approval to conduct the study was first obtained from the University of Cebu Academe Research Ethics Committee. Letters were then sent to the city social welfare head officers of Ormoc, Baybay, and Maasin City in Leyte to request permission to conduct the study. After approval was secured, potential informants were identified based on the stated criteria. The researcher visited the relevant offices, obtained informed consent from qualified informants, and administered the research instrument. Interviews were then conducted to gather deeper insights into the participants' experiences and perspectives on the implementation of the CICL Diversion Program. The collected data were later interpreted and analyzed to generate practical insights for improving work experiences and program implementation in Leyte.

2.7 Data Analysis Techniques

The study used Collaizi (1978) to systematically analyze the responses gathered from the participants. The process involved familiarization with the data, identification of significant statements, formulation of initial codes, grouping of codes into themes, review and refinement of themes, definition and naming of themes, and production of a coherent narrative report. Feedback and verification were also conducted to confirm the accuracy and authenticity of the identified themes. This method enabled the researcher to organize, synthesize, and interpret the participants' responses and strengthen the rigor and reliability of the study. In the presentation of findings, the researcher also described the use of qualitative thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006), through which important statements, core meanings, clustered themes, and emergent themes were developed.

2.8 Ethical Considerations

The study observed ethical principles to protect the dignity, rights, and welfare of the informants. The researcher prioritized beneficence by ensuring that the findings would contribute to improving work conditions, support systems, and recognition for Social Welfare Officers handling CICL cases. Non-maleficence was observed by anonymizing and de-identifying responses to prevent psychological, social, or professional harm. Justice was upheld by giving equal consideration to each participant's perspective, while autonomy was respected through informed consent, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality and privacy were maintained throughout data collection, analysis, and reporting.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Experiences of Social Welfare Officers in the Implementation of the CICL Diversion Program

The informants' experiences showed both positive and negative dimensions of implementing the CICL Diversion Program. Positive experiences were reflected in the themes Better Version and Avenue of Hope, while negative experiences were reflected in Reluctant Family, Social Stigma, and Delicate Family Dynamics. These findings indicate that the work of Social Welfare Officers involves both fulfillment and difficulty, especially because they deal directly with children, families, communities, and institutional limitations.

3.1.1 Better Version

The results showed that Social Welfare Officers found fulfillment in seeing CICL participants improve, participate in activities, display their talents, and gradually move toward positive behavioral change. The informants described the work as challenging but meaningful because it allowed them to guide children, communicate with families, understand children's behavior, and witness the children becoming better versions of themselves. Community activities, positive feedback, and children's visible achievements strengthened the implementers' sense of accomplishment. This finding suggests that the diversion program gives Social Welfare Officers a sense of professional purpose because their work produces visible improvements in CICL participants. The theme is connected to Team Performance Theory because continuous self-improvement, growth mindset, and open communication contribute to better team and program performance (Jensen, 2010). Team performance also depends on communication, leadership, and role clarity, as reflected in Tuckman's group development framework and Belbin's Team Role theory (Belbin, 2012). Therefore, the officers' fulfillment is linked not only to individual commitment but also to collaborative implementation.

3.1.2 Avenue of Hope

The results revealed that the CICL Diversion Program served as an avenue of hope for both the children and the Social Welfare Officers. Informants viewed the program as a chance for children to correct mistakes without immediately undergoing formal court proceedings. They also found meaning in seeing shy or hesitant children participate in counseling, open up about their problems, and show personal growth despite difficult circumstances. This finding reflects the role of hope, resilience, and self-efficacy in diversion work. Self-Efficacy Theory explains that belief in one's ability to overcome difficulties influences behavior, motivation, and perseverance. In this context, the program strengthens hope by allowing

implementers and CICL participants to see that change is possible. Khush (2019) described perceived self-efficacy as the belief that an individual has the capability to attain a specific goal, which supports the idea that confidence and hope can improve emotional well-being and life satisfaction.

3.2 Challenges Encountered in the Implementation of the CICL Diversion Program

The findings showed that Social Welfare Officers encountered serious challenges in implementation, particularly family resistance, community stigma, and complicated family relationships. These challenges affected the smooth delivery of interventions and required patience, communication, and sustained support from implementers.

3.2.1 Reluctant Family

The results showed that reluctant families were one of the major challenges in implementing the CICL Diversion Program. Informants explained that some families did not want to participate, lacked cooperation, or felt hopeless about the situation. Other difficulties included complicated family relationships, recidivism, uncooperative community-based officers, stigma toward the program, and lack of resources and funds. This finding indicates that family participation is essential in CICL rehabilitation because parents and relatives are part of the child's immediate support system. When families resist involvement, Social Welfare Officers must exert more effort in communication, trust-building, and coordination. The result also shows that diversion is not only a legal or social welfare intervention but also a family-centered process that requires cooperation from the child's home environment.

3.2.2 Social Stigma

The results revealed that CICL participants and implementers faced social stigma. Informants noted that stigma came from the community and sometimes from the participants' own internalized negative views. Some children refused to continue the program during the monitoring stage, while other cases involved harmful family influence, including situations where children were used by parents for personal gain. This finding shows that stigma can hinder rehabilitation and reintegration because it creates social exclusion, discrimination, and prejudice. Stigmas may prevent individuals from fully participating in society and may arise from stereotypes, misconceptions, and social labels (Goffman, 1963). The findings also support the need for implementers to develop collective competencies and create a favorable environment for change, since effective professional development helps produce stronger and more visionary implementers (Guskey, 2003).

3.2.3 Delicate Family Dynamics

The results showed that delicate family dynamics affected the implementation of the CICL Diversion Program. Informants described difficulties in handling cases where families were unwilling to participate, skeptical of the program, or emotionally difficult to engage. They emphasized that parental cooperation is important because parents are considered the child's first mentors, and full participation from the family is needed to help the child change for the better. This finding indicates that successful rehabilitation depends on the quality of family relationships, communication, and trust. The result is consistent with Team Performance Theory because family members, implementers, and community stakeholders function as a support system whose cooperation affects program success. Wilmot and Hocker (2017) emphasized the importance of resolving interpersonal conflict, while Olson and Gorall (2003) highlighted open communication and adaptation to change in family systems. Floyd (2009) further noted that conflict resolution choices affect relationships, making dialogue and nonviolent communication important in addressing family-related barriers.

3.3 Strategies Used to Address Problems in the CICL Diversion Program

The findings showed that Social Welfare Officers used counseling, skill-building programs, and outcome monitoring as major ways of addressing implementation problems. These strategies focused on emotional support, academic assistance, job training, psychosocial activities, peer feedback, and community partnerships.

3.3.1 Counseling as its Best

The results showed that counseling was the most emphasized intervention for addressing the emotional and psychological needs of CICL participants. Informants stated that counseling helped children open up, become more honest about their experiences, and receive emotional support. The intervention was also combined with academic support, job training, community partnership, and workshops on counseling and teaching strategies. This finding suggests that counseling is central to rehabilitation because it addresses the emotional causes of behavior and supports positive decision-making. The theme is anchored on Self-Efficacy Theory, which states that individuals' beliefs in their capabilities influence their actions and behaviors (Bandura, 1977). Implementers with strong self-efficacy are better able to manage challenges, adjust strategies, and build positive therapeutic relationships (Fagan & Zimring, 2000). Training that builds skills, feedback, and reinforcement may further strengthen implementers' confidence in guiding participants toward positive outcomes (Mulvey, 2006). Counseling also helps reduce anxiety, build resilience, improve self-confidence, and enhance quality of life (Madison, 2020).

3.3.2 Skill-Building Programs

The results revealed that skill-building programs were used to develop social, emotional, academic, vocational, and life skills among CICL participants. Informants identified counseling, skills training, education, sports, adaptive skills training, arts and crafts, academic sessions, psychosocial therapy, peer feedback, meditation, and Bible studies as part of the interventions. These activities were intended to help participants cope with past experiences, develop healthier behaviors, and strengthen their sense of belonging. This finding shows that diversion programs require holistic interventions that go beyond counseling alone. Glass (2022) noted that skill training programs allow individuals to learn at their own pace and support team-building, organizational goals, innovation, and adaptability. Team Performance Theory also supports collaborative skill-building because teamwork allows participants to share knowledge, build strengths, and learn from one another (Howell & Lipsey, 2012). Community-based programs provide less stigmatizing and more accessible alternatives to institutional care for CICL while supporting reintegration and reducing the risk of reoffending (Darnell and Schuler, 2015). Spiritual growth may also help address root causes of criminal behavior by developing purpose, self-awareness, responsibility, and empathy (Lucas, 2019).

3.3.3 Desired Result

The results showed that Social Welfare Officers validated program success through observable improvements among CICL participants. These included children leading activities, coaching other CICL participants, regaining self-confidence, improving emotional health, showing academic progress, and developing useful skills. Success stories and positive feedback from participants served as evidence that the interventions were effective. This finding suggests that achievement, recognition, and visible outcomes motivate implementers to continue their work despite challenges. The theme is connected to Competence Motivational Theory because implementers influence CICL participants and inspire them to perform beyond their perceived capabilities. Such motivation can empower individuals and encourage higher levels of performance (Riggio, 2009). Competence Motivational Theory developed by Harter, S. (1978) states that people are motivated to seek mastery and competence in different areas of life. Smirl (2018) also emphasized that achievement, recognition, and a sense of accomplishment sustain motivation, while the Law of Effect of Thorndike (1927) explains the connection between behavior and consequences. Government recognition, better salaries, remuneration, training, retraining, and staff development can strengthen social work efficiency, productivity, and performance (Onjoro et al., 2015).

3.4 Aspirations for Improving the CICL Diversion Program

The findings showed that Social Welfare Officers aspired for better institutional support, improved compensation, stronger recognition, more training, systematic validation of fieldwork, and stronger collaboration among families, communities, government agencies, and program implementers. These aspirations were reflected in the themes Additional Incentives and Being a Champion of Hope.

3.4.1 Additional Incentives

The results revealed that informants wanted improved compensation, better benefits, and stronger systems for recognizing and validating their fieldwork. Although some informants acknowledged that implementers were already recognized, they emphasized that the increasing number and complexity of CICL cases require greater support. They also wanted financial and professional rewards that reflect the difficulty and importance of their work. This finding shows that incentives are viewed as necessary for sustaining motivation, productivity, and job satisfaction among implementers. Financial rewards, promotions, and non-monetary recognition can create a more positive work environment and improve performance. In the context of the CICL Diversion Program, incentives are not merely personal benefits but institutional mechanisms that may help sustain service quality, validate fieldwork, and recognize the emotional and professional demands placed on Social Welfare Officers.

3.4.2 Being a Champion of Hope

The results showed that Social Welfare Officers aspired to become stronger advocates for children's rehabilitation and welfare. They wanted expanded benefits and privileges for implementers, more training and seminars, updates on roles and responsibilities, better compensation, and stronger support from families, communities, and the government. Their aspirations also included helping children feel safe, loved, confident, supported, and capable of pursuing their interests and talents. This finding indicates that Social Welfare Officers see their role not only as program implementers but also as advocates of hope, guidance, and social change. Their aspiration to help children return to the right path reflects a restorative and child-centered orientation. The theme also shows that sustainable implementation requires empowered workers, supportive communities, and responsive government systems. When implementers are trained, recognized, and adequately supported, they are better positioned to provide consistent care and help CICL participants rebuild their lives.

3.5 Overall Discussion

Overall, the results show that the CICL Diversion Program is experienced by Social Welfare Officers as both fulfilling and demanding. The positive themes show that implementers find meaning in helping children grow, regain confidence, and avoid formal justice processes. The negative themes show that implementation is affected by family resistance, stigma, and complex family relationships. The strategies used by informants show that counseling, skill-building, and outcome monitoring are essential in supporting rehabilitation and reintegration. The findings further suggest that effective CICL

diversion depends on the interaction of individual competence, team performance, self-efficacy, family participation, community acceptance, and institutional support. The results align with Team Performance Theory, Competence Motivation Theory, and Self-Efficacy Theory because the work of Social Welfare Officers requires collaboration, motivation, resilience, and confidence. Strengthening training, incentives, family engagement, and inter-agency support can improve the sustainability and effectiveness of the CICL Diversion Program in Leyte.

4. Conclusion & Recommendations

This qualitative phenomenological study using Colaizzi (1978) explored the work experiences of nine Social Welfare Officers handling the Children in Conflict with the Law (CICL) Diversion Program in Ormoc, Baybay, and Maasin City, Leyte. The findings generated ninety significant statements, twelve cluster themes, and ten major themes showing that the officers experienced both fulfillment and difficulty in implementation. Positive experiences were reflected in Better Version and Avenue of Hope, while negative experiences included Reluctant Family, Social Stigma, and Delicate Family Dynamics. To address these challenges, the officers relied on Counseling as its Best, Skill-Building Programs, and Desired Result, while their aspirations focused on Additional Incentives and Being a Champion of Hope. Overall, the study concludes that Social Welfare Officers play a vital role in CICL rehabilitation, diversion, intervention, and reintegration, but their effectiveness is affected by limited resources, heavy workloads, family-related challenges, stigma, and gaps in coordination.

Based on the findings, Social Welfare Officers should further strengthen their communication skills, professional competencies, and ethical practices to manage conflicts and implement the CICL Diversion Program more effectively. Parents, families, and relatives should actively participate in the child's rehabilitation and develop a better understanding of the program's goals, strategies, and outcomes. Barangay officials, the Philippine National Police, Local Government Units, and the Department of Social Welfare and Development should improve collaboration, training, resource allocation, referral systems, wellness support, program evaluation, and recognition mechanisms for Social Welfare Officers. Future studies should pursue cross-disciplinary research involving social work, psychology, law, trauma-informed practice, support systems, youth empowerment strategies, and client-centered approaches to deepen understanding of CICL diversion implementation.

The study was limited to the work experiences of nine Social Welfare Officers assigned to the CICL Diversion Program in Ormoc, Baybay, and Maasin City, Leyte; therefore, its findings are grounded in the lived experiences of these informants within the specific local context of the study. Since it used a qualitative phenomenological design, the findings focused on personal experiences, challenges, meanings, and aspirations rather than statistical generalization. The study also centered on the perspectives of Social Welfare Officers, which means that broader views from CICL participants, parents, families, barangay officials, law enforcement personnel, and other stakeholders may be further explored in future research.

Compliance with ethical standards

This study was conducted in accordance with institutional ethical standards, with approval obtained prior to data gathering. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was secured from all Social Welfare Officer-informants before the interviews. Confidentiality, anonymity, and data privacy were observed throughout the study, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time. The researcher declares no conflict of interest and acknowledges the valuable contributions of the informants and concerned offices. All authorship responsibilities, intellectual content, and copyright ownership remain with the researcher, and the study was carried out with respect for beneficence, non-maleficence, justice, and autonomy.

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