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Probation Officers' Perceptions on the Utilization of Intermediary Support Services: A Child and Human Rights Perspectives

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Abstract

The utilization of the intermediary support services is essential to ensure respect, advocacy, dignity, well-being, and protection for the rights of child offenders within the criminal justice system. Grounded in the child and human rights perspectives, such as South Africa's Child Justice System, the African Union charter on the rights and welfare of the child, United Nations conventions on the rights of the child, the study examined probation officers' perceptions of the role and value of intermediary support services to enhance child-sensitive justice. Using a qualitative, exploratory design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 probation officers, purposively selected to contribute to and respond to the research questions. The study used the child participation theory and the rights-based approach to provide a framework. The study used thematic analysis, and four key themes emerged, which include (1) recognition of intermediary support services as child-rights protection, (2) conflicting understanding and knowledge gaps, (3) systemic, structural, and resource-related barriers, (4) need for strengthening capacity and policy guidance, (5) significance of multi-disciplinary partnerships to improve child-sensitive justice. Enhancing probation officers' knowledge, skills, and use of intermediary support services is essential to promoting child-friendly justice and advancing the human rights of child offenders. Training and capacity building are essential to enhance probation officers' understanding of the importance of using intermediary support services. The study adhered to universal ethical principles and standards to protect its integrity, including informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and avoidance of harm.

Introduction

Intermediary support services are among the significant mechanisms deployed to safeguard children and ensure a sensitive child justice system. It is a system designed to enhance children's participation as witnesses, reduce pressure, stress, and trauma in the child justice system (Bekink, 2021). Intermediary support services seek to improve access to justice and ensure that child witnesses can act as witnesses in an environment supported by a professional, such as a social worker, who understands how to work with children. This happens without the threats of the public gallery in court, as there is a designated room for the service (Songca, 2019). In South Africa, the Criminal Procedure Act (51 of 1977), section 170A, enables the provision of intermediary support services to facilitate effective and efficient participation of children in a child-sensitive criminal justice system (High Court of South Africa, 2024). Children are made to testify in a closed, secure room, with child-friendly questioning, to protect children as vulnerable witnesses and improve fairness in court communication systems. Historically, child witnesses were concentrated on children with disabilities and mental problems (Msibi, 2023). In contemporary South Africa, the intermediary support services include a broader vulnerable witnesses, including children in conflict with the law, children who witnessed the commission of a crime. This is consistent with a child-friendly, sensitive approach to justice that is developmental and contextually appropriate (Child Witness Institute, 2022).

The provision of intermediary support services aligns with international standards for broader human rights. The African Union Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child affirm the child's right to be treated fairly, despite alleged criminal acts. Article 40 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child posits that every child who is alleged or accused of having engaged in criminal activity must be treated with respect, dignity, and a manner that promotes participation, protection, and reintegration (Bekink, 2021). General Comment No. 24 (2019) invites states to adopt a child-sensitive, developmentally oriented justice. This emphasizes non-custodial measures, promotes diversion from formal criminal proceedings, and reduces harm to children during those proceedings. The General Comment further protects the child's participation and due process (United Nations Digital Library, 2024). Article 12 emphasizes the child's right to be heard in any matter affecting them. This places the mandate and obligation on the state to ensure an enabling environment for the child to be heard in a child-sensitive, child-friendly manner. The child rights core on intermediary use of dignity, respect, participation, accessibility, age appropriateness, privacy, and due process systemizes the obligations into practical principles (Msibi, 2023).

Background, problem statement, aims, and objectives.

In South Africa, probation officers are statutorily appointed social workers who serve as key implementers of child-sensitive justice. They are crucial actors who conduct assessments of children in conflict with the law, recommend and administer diversion, liaise with the court, and do community-based supervision (Tshivhase, 2024). South Africa’s Child Justice Act 75 of 2008 establishes a designated child justice system that ensures the protection of children's rights in conflict with the law and provides alternative mechanisms for dealing with children alleged to have committed an offense. The child justice system is grounded in restorative justice and constitutional values, aiming to ensure the best interests of the child and seeking to outline developmentally responsive procedures (Department of Justice and Constitutional Development, 2023/24; Mangwiro et al., 2024)). The probation officers work closely with social workers who provide intermediary support services in court to ensure child-sensitive, friendly court proceedings. This is aimed at ensuring that children receive the support they need to act as witnesses outside the court's public gallery. Despite the enabling environment and framework for child justice, the processes of intermediary support services and their application remain unevenly understood (Malesa & Mashamba, 2024).

This study examines the probation officer’s perceptions of the utilization of intermediary support services for children in the criminal justice system. South Africa provides an enabling framework and environment through its comprehensive child justice system, rooted in the constitutional principles of the best interests of the child and the intermediary standards or practices (Makwala, 2022). Grounded in the rights-based principles and approach to social work, which emphasizes respect, dignity, participation, advocacy, transparency, non-discrimination, social justice, and accountability. This study explores how probation officers understand the roles of intermediary practitioners, identify the barriers hindering their use, identify the enablers to their use, and align the use of intermediary support services with child rights standards (Bekink, 2021). The study aims to bring professional perspectives to the fore by strengthening

access to justice and child-centred, sensitive justice. This is essential to ensure the protection and safeguarding of the rights of children in conflict with the law and those expected to use intermediary support services (DOJ&CD, 2023/24).

Although South Africa has an adequate legal and policy framework that promotes a child-friendly, sensitive justice system, there is a lack of empirical data on how probation officers understand and use intermediary support services to benefit children (Msibi, 2023). Existing literature focuses on the legal, policy, and procedural dimensions of intermediaries, neglecting frontline practitioners' experiences, knowledge, insights, challenges, and knowledge gaps, such as probation officers' or social workers' (Tshivhase, 2024). This creates a significant research gap regarding how probation officers understand and value the intermediary support services to children. Despite global and regional standards that urge participation, respect, procedural fairness, harm reduction, and protective accommodation, the gap persists (Malesa & Mashamba, 2024). The aim of this study is to explore probation officers' perceptions of the use of intermediary support services from a child and human rights perspective. The following are the objectives of the study:

- To explore how probation officers understand and value the role of intermediary support services.
- To establish gaps in training, knowledge, and implementation of the intermediary support services.
- To examine the structural and systemic factors that influence service utilization.
- To determine mechanisms that improve child-sensitive care through the use of intermediary support services.

The study is deeply rooted in human rights approaches, recognizing children's rights to participation, protection, advocacy, respect, dignity, and fair treatment within the child and criminal justice system. Adopting the principles of the Child Justice Act and South Africa's constitution, the study positions the state and helping professionals, such as social workers and probation officers, to ensure the universal principle of the best interests of the child and to enhance proportional access to justice (Tshivhase, 2024). Intermediary support services are essential to enable children to have meaningful participation that is emotionally protected, developmentally appropriate for different ages, and free from threats. The study investigates how probation officers understand their human rights roles and duties, how systemic barriers hinder their fulfillment, and how enhancing intermediary services can foster a rights-based perspective that protects children from harm. The study strengthens the voices of the vulnerable witnesses and promotes proportional justice outcomes (Msibi, 2023).

The study is important for the global audience because of the international promotion of access to child-sensitive justice through various regional and international bodies such as the African Union and the United Nations. In many different countries, children in conflict with the law experience difficulties with participation, access, procedural problems, and fair treatment within the child justice and criminal justice systems. They experience secondary victimization, intimidation, and reduced rights in the justice system (UNICEF, 2024). This makes the study more relevant to an international audience, as its findings can be transferred to different contexts worldwide. The study provides insights into global debates about child-

sensitive justice and how to improve child justice to ensure meaningful access. The child-centred systems align with the global human rights principles and enhance the global standards (UNODC, UNICEF & WHO, 2025). The restorative approach is an international practice to promote trauma-informed, child-centred, and sensitive justice systems. The study is significantly relevant to the international community as it seeks to improve child-sensitive justice and access to justice through intermediary support services (ISO, 2025).

Theoretical framework

The study has adopted two theoretical frameworks to provide an understanding of probation officers' perceptions of the role and values of intermediary support services. The study employed the rights-based approach (RBA) to social work and the child participation (Child-Rights) theory (Gabel, 2023/24; Tarshish & Benish, 2025)). These two frameworks are crucial and relevant to the study, as they provide insight into the phenomenon. This approach to social work views children as active participants, whose protection, rights, dignity, and participation should be maintained in all engagements with the child or criminal justice system (Lombe & Adroff, 2025). This approach provides insight into how probation officers respond to situations in which children in conflict with the law require intermediary support services. This approach is rooted in South Africa's Child Justice Act, Constitution, the African Charter on the rights and welfare of the child, and the United Nations conventions on the rights of the child, which assert the importance of child justice, accessibility, and participation. In social work practice, a rights-based approach is crucial to upholding and respecting children's rights (Palma & Verity, 2025).

The rights-based approach to social work is especially relevant to this study because of the involvement of probation officers in the criminal justice system, where children may be violated. This approach assesses whether the intermediary support services align with the universal standards of the best interests of the child as outlined in the Children's Act, the Child Justice Act, the RSA Constitution, the African Charter on the rights and welfare of the child, and the United Nations Conventions on the rights of the child (Ringson, 2024). This approach was important because it assessed the probation officers' perceptions of their awareness and responsibility to ensure respect for the intermediary support services. This approach shows the gap between children's lived experiences and the rights outlined in the law. The rights-based approach to social work was relevant and important because it advocates improving access to justice through intermediary support services and aligns with human rights practices. It promotes the child-sensitive, centred, and compassionate meaningful justice (Tarshish & Benish, 2025).

The child participation theory is grounded in the principles that children should be involved in decision-making and allowed to express their views. The theory posits that children should be meaningfully engaged in a developmentally appropriate manner during the criminal justice system (Terre Des Hommes, 2023). Child participation theory provides an understanding of how intermediary support services enable children's ability to relay their views and communicate effectively during court proceedings. The theory shows that participation includes the effective use of the intermediary support

services, an enabling environment with court settings, and reduced intimidation (Ringson, 2024). The theory indicates that probation officers have a significant role in ensuring that children's participation is respectful, voluntary, and supported. This theory is fundamentally relevant to the study because probation officers primarily serve as advocates for children in the criminal justice system (Lombe & Adroff, 2025). Probation officers ensure linkage with the intermediary support services that serve as a bridge of access to justice and enable meaningful participation. This theory provides insights into how probation officers understand the role of child participation in child-sensitive justice (Tarshish & Benish, 2025).

The integration of the rights-based approach to social work and the child participation theory aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals. The sustainable development goals, SDGs 3 (Good health and wellbeing), SDG 10 (Reduced inequality), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and strong institutions) were found relevant to the study to ensure the equal and fair treatment of children in conflict with the law while accessing justice (UNICEF, 2023). SDG 16 promotes fairness, transformation, and inclusivity to enhance child-sensitive, child-friendly justice. It ensures strong institutions within the justice system through intermediary support services and the important role of probation officers (UNICEF, 2023). SDG 10 was found to be essential as it promotes equal treatment and protection of vulnerable witnesses. The SDGs are crucial because of the global presence of child justice and the international standards of ensuring the best interests of the child and access to a meaningful child justice system (UNODC, OHCHR, UNDP, 2024).

Literature review

Intermediary support services as a technique for child protection and child justice.

Intermediary support services are an essential program aimed at protecting children's rights, integrity, dignity, and participation within the child justice system. Intermediary support services play a vital role in safeguarding children and ensuring meaningful justice for children in conflict with the law (Strydom, Schiller & Orme, 2020). The services are used as a crucial tool to enhance children's access to justice, in line with South Africa's Child Justice Act, the Constitution, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, and the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child. The support service protects children from the public gallery by placing them in a safe room, with support from professionals trained to work with children in the justice system (UNICEF, 2024). Children in conflict with the law and within the criminal justice system should find a safe space and environment to safeguard a child-sensitive approach to justice. Children in conflict with the law should always be protected in line with local, regional, and international standards for the best interests of the child. They should be provided support to reduce secondary victimization, reduce trauma, and receive intermediary support services (Center for Child Law, 2023/24). Intermediary support services ensure meaningful participation of children, contribute to trauma-support services, and procedural justice. Intermediary support services enable children to understand court proceedings, feel safe and protected, and respond in a reasonable and calm

manner. This approach aligns with the universal human rights standards of fair treatment, access to justice, and the best interest of the child (Child Justice Alliance, 2024/25).

Perception, understanding, and knowledge of probation officers about intermediary support services.

The perception, knowledge levels, and understanding of probation officers and other professionals within the child justice system regarding intermediary support services remain paramount. Some probation officers perceive intermediary support services as critical partners in safeguarding and child protection, enhancing child-friendly, sensitive justice (Gxubane & Melish, 2024). Although other probation officers perceive the role of the intermediary support services as optional. Probation officers understand intermediary support services as enablers of fair treatment of children within the child justice system and as advocates for participation, respect, and dignity. They understand that intermediary support services enhance access to justice for children in conflict with the law and those expected to provide evidence in court (Tshivhase, 2024). Intermediary support services promote child-friendly, sensitive justice in line with local, regional, and global statutes that advance the best interests of the child and meaningful safeguarding of children. The lack of knowledge and understanding of the probation offers regarding the intermediary support services disrupts the utilization of the service and negatively affects the participation of children in the child justice system, and makes children vulnerable (Makwala, 2022). Children's rights, safety, access, and participation may be compromised because of the lack of training, knowledge, and skills. A child-friendly environment, primarily fostered by probation officers and intermediary practitioners, is essential to ensuring compliance with the procedures as guided by the statutes (Strydom, Schiller & Orme, 2020).

Barriers to the implementation of the intermediary support services

There are various structural barriers that hinder the utilization of the intermediary support services for children. The barriers are resource-related, systemic, and structural, and they include inadequate child-friendly facilities, such as a designated room with equipment to enhance evidence presentation (Kearns, et al., 2024). A shortage of trained intermediary practitioners is one of the key constraints identified as disrupting the provision of intermediary support services. High caseloads are one of the challenges that make it difficult to provide effective intermediary support services to children in conflict with the law and those who seek the services of the intermediary office (Banda et al., 2024). Despite a strong legal and policy framework, the gap in barriers persists due to poor communication among relevant departments, such as the police, social development, and justice. These challenges negatively affect children because they are unable to access support and present comprehensive evidence in court. Systemic and structural constraints compromise children's human rights to fair treatment, participation, respect, dignity, and the right to advocacy (Malesa & Mashamba, 2024).

Research methodology and design

A qualitative research approach was adopted for this study. This approach was suitable and relevant because it sought to gain insight into participants' knowledge. The researchers used this approach to

examine probation officers' perceptions of the role and value of intermediary support services. This approach focused on participants' attitudes and feelings in their natural settings to protect participants and the study (Canton, 2024). The approach aligns with the study's title, aims, and objectives. Exploratory designs align with qualitative research and were used in this study to explore probation officers' perceptions of intermediary support services. This design was essential because it enabled the researcher to gather more insightful information relevant to answering the research questions, aims, and objectives of the study (Cox, 2024). The design was employed to address the research gap identified and to ensure that it provides an understanding of probation officers' perspectives on the phenomenon. This design was used to investigate how probation officers value the use of intermediary support services in alignment with the universal standards of the best interests of the child, child participation, respect, and a child-friendly, sensitive approach (Lambelet, Ros & Kloetzer, 2023).

It was essential for the study to develop inclusion criteria because not all members of the population had an equal chance of being selected to contribute. The inclusion criteria were developed to ensure that suitable participants are recruited to the study. The study recruited probation officers who are working for the Department of Social Development in Mopani District, Limpopo Province, South Africa. These probation officers were expected to be registered with the South African Council for Social Services Professions (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025). They were expected to have at least five years of experience as probation officers working with children in conflict with the law. The probation officers needed to have worked with the intermediary practitioners, referring children who may need their services. Participants were required to have an understanding of English due to the district's diverse nature and the participants' backgrounds (Babbie & Mouton, 2017).

Empirical research studies require data collection and analysis. The researchers followed a systematic data-collection process to gather information from participants on probation officers' perceptions of the use of intermediary support services. This process was guided by the interview guide developed to help during the data collection session. The study used a semi-structured interview schedule to collect data from participants. Eligible participants who met the inclusion criteria were interviewed to address the study's research questions, aims, and objectives (Levitt, 2021). The instrument enabled smooth data collection and provided greater insight into the phenomenon. It allowed the researchers to ask questions, probe when unclear, and seek clarification when unsatisfied with the answers, ensuring clarity in the questions. The researchers were responsible for the data collection process, which lasted a month. The researchers encountered no difficulties during this process (Moreno, 2017). The interview periods varied among participants, averaging 50 minutes. Data saturation occurred during the interview with participant 15. The study initially planned to interview 20 participants to provide in-depth insights into probation officers' perceptions of the role and value of intermediary support services. The data collection process could not continue because participants began repeating information provided by others (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2019). Before data collection, the study obtained ethical clearance and permission to conduct the study. The data was analyzed thematically using the steps developed by Thompson (2022). Data transcription was the essential process of data analysis, with researchers using verbatim transcription. After data transcription, the researchers analyzed the data using Thompson's steps. Familiarization was

an essential step in data analysis, during which the researchers repeatedly listened to the audio and read the transcripts to ensure they understood the content of the collected data. The researchers coded the data after identifying similar content and developed themes following the coding process. Themes were then reviewed to ensure the writing process could begin (Kalu & Bwalya, 2017).

Sampling and procedure are important steps in every research study to determine the population and the process of selecting participants from it. The study population comprised probation officers employed by the Limpopo Department of Social Development in Mopani District, South Africa. The study was conducted in Mopani District because of the limited usage of the intermediary support services for children within the criminal and child justice system, compromising the children's human rights. While research has two sampling methods, this study used a non-probability sampling method (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This method was used because it aligns with the research approach and design adopted for this study. In non-probability sampling, participants do not have an equal chance of being selected into the study because of the eligibility criteria. This method was essential because the study's recruitment process focused on those eligible for inclusion according to the inclusion criteria (Babbie & Mouton, 2017). A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants to answer the research questions based on their knowledge, experience, and expertise. The participants were selected because they were found to be eligible and met the inclusion criteria. The researchers developed criteria and published them during recruitment to ensure that the correct people participated. The publication and advertisement of the recruitment process were crucial to avoid bias in participant selection (Moreno, 2017).

Ethical considerations were central to the study to protect its integrity. The researchers informed the participants about the aims and objectives, benefits, and risks of participating in this study. The participants were requested to sign an informed consent form consenting to their participation and to audio recording. Informed consent was essential to protect the integrity of the study, as it involves human participants (Kalu & Bwalya, 2017). Confidentiality was crucial in the study, and the researchers maintained confidentiality of the information submitted during the interviews. Confidential information was encrypted on the laptop using a password, and other information was stored in a lockable cupboard. Anonymity was vital to protect the integrity of the study and the participants. The researchers did not have personal identifying information about the participants to ensure anonymity. Anonymity of the participants was central to the study to protect them from potential harm. Avoiding harm was one of the critical principles for maintaining the participants' emotional stability (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2019). The researchers avoided asking sensitive questions that may trigger the participants. In case of emotional vulnerability and triggering of the participants, the researchers made available the debriefing sessions to help participants who are triggered. The study obtained ethical clearance from the institutional research committee and received permission. This allowed the researcher to continue data collection. This process was conducted prior to data collection to comply with universal research standards (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Trustworthiness is crucial in research to ensure rigor and avoid bias. The study maintained trustworthiness to explore probation officers' perceptions of the role and values of intermediary support services. The semi-structured interviews and interactions with participants ensured the study's credibility (Moreno, 2017). The study's findings, derived from systematic, scientific research, ensure transferability. The in-depth, rich data ensured that the study's findings could be transferred to other research contexts. The study followed scientific methodological processes to develop themes that are reliable and dependable. Journaling and ethical standards, behavior enabled researchers to avoid bias and ensure confirmability. The trustworthy study findings regarding probation officers' perceptions are crucial to ensure confirmability and avoid bias (Levitt, 2021).

Study findings

Five key themes emerged from this study's findings regarding probation officers' perceptions of the role and value of intermediary support services. These findings are essential for understanding the role of probation officers in enhancing access to child-friendly justice, ensuring children's participation, and upholding children's human rights and fair treatment. The findings highlight the significance of intermediary support services as a mechanism for child protection, conflicting views on their roles, structural barriers, the need to improve capacity and policy, and the importance of a multidisciplinary approach to enhance a child-sensitive approach. The identified themes are listed in the table below and discussed in detail thereafter to provide an understanding of the study's findings.

Table 1: Themes

Theme 1: Recognition of intermediary support services as child-rights protection
Theme 2: Conflicting understanding and knowledge gaps
Theme 3: Systemic, structural, and resource-related barriers
Theme 4: Need for strengthening capacity and policy guidance
Theme 5: Significance of multi-disciplinary partnerships to improve child-sensitive justice

Theme 1: Recognition of intermediary support services as child-rights protection

Probation officers viewed the intermediary support services as a mechanism to ensure children's safety, meaningful participation, and respect and dignity during court proceedings. Participants reported that they perceive the intermediary as an essential service that enhances child-sensitive justice by providing additional support. The study found that probation officers perceive the intermediary support services to safeguard children from unfair proceedings, and to give them confidence to give evidence without discrimination, emotional harm, fears, anxiety, and intimidation. The study established that intermediary practitioners assist children to have coherent expression in court, reduce trauma associated with the

public gallery, and uphold the best interests of the child, as well as dignity, respect, social justice, and participation rights.

Intermediary support services improve access to justice and ensure that children participate meaningfully and in a conducive environment. Intermediary practitioners help children build confidence and advocate for a child-friendly environment.

As a probation officer, I recognize the importance and value of the probation intermediary support services. They have good facilities, child-friendly rooms with cameras, and the message is conveyed to the court through various means.

Intermediary practitioners help children to express themselves better during court proceedings. They prevent trauma, ensure social justice, and ensure child participation in the process. Children are able to testify without fear of discrimination, intimidation, or fear.

Children's participation through the intermediary practitioners enhances communication. Children coherently relay their message when guided by a trained and skilled intermediary practitioner. This is consistent with the RSA Constitution and the other local, regional, and global statutes that provide for children's participation, respect, dignity, and meaningful contribution. The findings of this study align with the literature on the recognition of intermediary support services as a means of safeguarding children (Strydom, Schiller & Orme, 2020). Studies argue that intermediary support services protect children from harassment, discrimination, intimidation, and social injustice. Intermediary support services aim to improve access to child-sensitive justice and ensure children's participation without fear. Probation officers understand that intermediary practitioners are trained and dedicated social workers who use their skills to protect children within the justice system and ensure the maintenance and protection of children's human rights (Tshivhase, 2024). The intermediary practitioners align on creating a safe environment guided by different institutions and legislations, such as the RSA Constitution, the African Charter on the Rights of the Child, and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Kearns et al., 2024).

Theme 2: Conflicting understanding and knowledge gaps

Participants presented varying views on their understanding of intermediary support services. They have different understandings of what intermediary support services entail, indicating a training gap. While probation officers value the intermediary support services, there are inconsistencies in who should use them, when, and how. Despite the significant value of the intermediary support service, some probation officers demonstrated knowledge of the legal procedures, criteria, and the service's importance, while others lacked interpretation and relied on personal knowledge rather than on policy and the legal framework. The study found that the inconsistencies include eligibility criteria for children requiring intermediary support services, requirements for obtaining intermediary support services, the services provided by intermediary support services, and differences between intermediary and psychological

services. The study revealed that probation officers have conflicting understandings of intermediary support services.

An intermediary support service is important to provide a free and fair environment for children to have confidence in their participation in court. It is essential to ensure that children's rights are respected in the child and criminal justice systems.

The intermediary support services are crucial, but there are numerous challenges regarding their scope, knowledge, and procedures for accessing them. The information is unclear about how to obtain their services and the referral procedures.

I rely on my knowledge and personal experience to determine what may be required to secure the intermediary's services. We have not been formally informed of what is required and how children can get these services. Intermediary practitioners need to market their services.

Intermediary support services are not well known among probation officers, and they are not fully used. The lack of understanding of intermediary services leads to confusion about referrals and utilization rates. The services are flagged as underutilized due to inconsistencies in understanding the criteria, referral mechanisms, and procedures for accessing their services (Makwala, 2022). There is a misapplication of the correct procedures and an inadequate understanding of the roles and functions of intermediary practitioners. There is a lack of standardized guidelines for accessing intermediary support services. The absence of formal, standardized training exacerbates confusion among probation officers about intermediary support services (Banda et al., 2024). The study's findings confirm the literature on probation officers' conflicting understandings of when, how, and who can access intermediary support services. The findings indicate that probation officers lack clear direction on procedures and referral pathways to the service. This has the potential to support children's rights to a child-sensitive and friendly justice (Gxubane & Melish, 2024).

Theme 3: Systemic, structural, and resource-related barriers

The participants indicated that there are few intermediary practitioners in the courts in Mopani District, with some courts not having any. High caseloads and a lack of partnerships and collaborations are among the barriers to access and utilization of intermediary support services. The lack of resources was identified as a significant constraint on the use of intermediary support services. The systemic and structural limitations emerged as the central barrier to the effective use of intermediary support services to enhance children's accessibility and meaningful participation. The participants indicated that there are limited trained practitioners in rural courts, particularly in Mopani District, to offer the intermediary support services. Participants highlight a lack of physical and technological infrastructure to effectively deliver intermediary support services, a significant resource-related barrier. The fragmented collaboration and coordination between interested departments make it difficult to access the service and use it to benefit the children.

Intermediary practitioners have high caseloads and are struggling to cope with their allocation. They are overburdened by the number of cases they receive due to a shortage of intermediary practitioners. Many of them serve different courts, making it difficult to manage their workload effectively.

There are problems with the infrastructure in some courts. This is a significant barrier hindering accessibility to child-sensitive and friendly justice. There are problems with physical infrastructure, communication, and technological infrastructure.

Lack of collaboration from interested departments, such as the police, social development, and justice, hinders the availability and accessibility of intermediary support services. These departments are unable to work together for the best interest of children.

The findings of this study are consistent with previous studies regarding the barriers hindering effective intermediary support services. In rural courts, intermediary support programs lack adequate resources to enable effective intermediary support and children's participation. There are limited resources, such as infrastructure, communication mechanisms, and intermediary practitioners, making it difficult to comply with the legal provisions on the free and fair treatment of children in court (Malesa & Mashamba, 2024). There are high caseloads for court intermediary practitioners in rural areas because they serve multiple courts with limited resources. The intermediary practitioners are overburdened with excessive caseloads that disrupt the effective provision of quality services. Only a few courtrooms are equipped with the necessary technology to enhance communication between the child and the court (Banda et al., 2024). Lack of communication between interested departments, such as the police, social development, and justice, is one of the significant barriers for children to access the service and fully use it free from intimidation and discrimination. The identified challenges contribute to a high number of children attending court without the support and protection of intermediary practitioners (Bekink, 2024).

Theme 4: Need for strengthening capacity and policy guidance

The probation officers indicated that additional training is needed to better understand the policy framework. They highlight that strengthened capacity enhances children's meaningful participation. Participants emphasized the importance of having probation officers who are trained and understand policy guidelines. The study revealed that strengthening capacity would improve child and human rights standards and justice. It found that continuous professional development of probation officers would enhance competencies. Continuous professional development would enhance probation officers' understanding of policies and legislation, such as the Child Justice Act, for consistent implementation.

Training is significant for a better understanding of the policies that enhance child-friendly, sensitive justice. Training strengthens probation officers' capacity to better understand policy guidance.

Continuous professional development is important because we operate in an evolving environment, with changing policies that align with global standards on children's rights. It enhances probation officers' competency to be inclusive in their approach.

Strengthening probation officers' capacity is crucial to better understanding and implementing policy and legislation. Training is essential to ensure that professionals have updated information. Continuous professional development ensures that probation officers stay abreast of developments within the justice system (Ringson, 2024). It would enhance children's rights within the child justice system through intermediary support services. In professional responsibilities, continuous professional development is essential to stay informed about updated information, including amendments to policies, acts, and legislation. The child justice environment is an evolving sector that seeks to safeguard the rights of the child and act in the best interest of the child (Lombe & Adroff, 2025). The availability of training and the development of probation officers help keep them abreast of changes in the child justice space and ensure that intermediary support services enhance children's rights to child-sensitive justice. The findings of this study are consistent with the literature on strengthening capacity, training, and continuous professional development (Tarshish & Benish, 2025).

Theme 5: Significance of multi-disciplinary partnerships to improve child-sensitive justice

The study has revealed the significance of multidisciplinary collaboration in enhancing child-sensitive justice. The participants indicated that partnership is important to ensure a comprehensive, holistic approach to protecting children's rights within the child justice system. The probation officers highlight that court intermediary practitioners cannot work in isolation if they want to provide holistic intervention and support to the children. Collaborations with different stakeholders are vital to improve access to justice for children and ensure they receive the support required, in line with the principle of the best interests of the child. These stakeholders include prosecutors, police, teachers, the court clerk, child protection organizations, psychologists, and social workers.

Probation officers work with the multidisciplinary team and collaborate with various stakeholders. We provide effective services when we have a pool of experts focusing on different responsibilities. A multi-disciplinary team enhances better interventions.

Working together with prosecutors, the police, and psychologists enhances better intervention to support children to have meaningful participation in the child justice system. Court intermediary practitioners will not be able to deliver effective interventions when working in isolation from other interested professionals.

As helping professionals, it is essential to work as a team to ensure effective intervention for service recipients. Court intermediary practitioners are more effective when they use the services of other professionals and when they collaborate.

Helping professionals, probation officers, court intermediary practitioners, and social workers have an obligation to work in the multi-disciplinary team. This enhances their competence in their intervention and their ability to serve the interests of the service recipient. Collaboration recognises the skills, knowledge, and expertise that a professional may not have to assist clients (Ringson, 2024). The child justice system requires collaboration among stakeholders, who are role players in the system. Prosecutors, social workers, police, psychologists, and teachers are interested in child and human rights,

and each plays a complementary role in ensuring fair child justice. The collaboration advances child-sensitive justice and ensures a conducive environment for protecting people (Makwala, 2022). Acknowledging the roles of different stakeholders is essential to gaining a basic understanding of what is expected of each. The findings of this study concur with the literature regarding the significant role of stakeholders and the multidisciplinary team (Banda et al., 2024).

Discussion

The study explored the probation officers' perceptions of the role and value of intermediary support services in the criminal justice system. The study was rooted in the rights-based approach to social work and the child participation theory. Five key themes emerged from the study's findings, each highlighting significant knowledge and structural strengths, identified gaps, and opportunities for improving child-sensitive and child-friendly justice. The study's findings show that the court intermediary is a crucial safeguard for children in court proceedings (Tshivhase, 2024). Probation officers emphasized that intermediaries reduce threats and intimidation and provide emotional safety. The intermediaries uphold the universal principles of child protection, participation, dignity, and respect. This approach aligns with the global standards of the African Charter on the rights and welfare of the child, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The submission further aligns with South Africa's Children's Act, Child Justice Act, and the Constitution. These institutions and legislations emphasize the safeguarding of children's rights, the best interest of the child, and child-sensitive and friendly justice. These services are aligned with the rights-based approach to social and child participation theory (Malesa & Mashamba, 2024).

Inconsistencies in probation officers' understanding of the role, value, procedures, criteria, and referral cases to intermediary practitioners were among the key findings. The knowledge disparities among probation officers led to confusion, misinterpretation, a low referral rate, and reliance on personal experience rather than on policy and legislative guidelines. Given the provisions and legal requirements outlined in sections 170A of the Criminal Procedure Act and the Child Justice Act, which aim to ensure fairness in the child and criminal justice systems, it is concerning that significant discrepancies exist in their implementation (Kearn et al., 2024). The variance in understanding indicates significant gaps in training and continuous professional development, as well as a lack of collaboration within intermediary services. Systemic resource shortages emerged as a critical barrier to access to intermediary support services. The lack of infrastructure facilities diminishes the notion of child-friendly justice and sensitivity to the global standards on the rights of the child. Over-excessive workload among probation officers and intermediary practitioners is one of the constraints that hinder fair participation of children in a child-sensitive justice (Makwala, 2022).

Strengthening capacity for policy implementation is crucial to ensure that all stakeholders with an interest in the intermediary services have a clear understanding of the requirements and criteria for receiving the service. Probation officers need to improve their understanding of the policies, legislation, and referral pathways relating to court intermediaries, child rights-based approaches, and the referral

pathways. One of the mechanisms identified as crucial was continuous professional development to enhance knowledge and to implement policies and legislation. Continuous professional development is vital to keep abreast of the development within the child justice environment (Malesa & Mashamba, 2024). It is fundamental to ensure probation officers receive continuous training to keep up with policy shifts and amendments. It is crucial to strengthen capacity to ensure the effective implementation of local, regional, and global policies and legislation for a child-sensitive justice system. The findings align with the child participation theory, which emphasizes the centrality of the child in matters affecting the child and the best interests of the child (Banda et al., 2024). It emphasizes the child's participation and involvement in any case under the child and human rights law. The theory is vital to prevent the child from being victimized by the system and its stakeholders.

Conclusion

The study concludes that intermediary support services need to be standardized and that probation officers should receive mandatory training on referral procedures, eligibility, and legal procedures. The study provides critical depth into probation officers' perceptions of the intermediary support services in a child and human rights environment. The findings confirm that probation officers understand the role of intermediary support services in enhancing participation, respect, and safeguarding children's rights. There are, however, inconsistencies with the criteria and procedures for accessing the intermediary support services. Several challenges exist, including knowledge gaps, insufficient training, and limited resources. Infrastructure barriers, including the shortage of intermediary practitioners, are hindering accessibility to the service. The identified constraints undermine the principles of the best interest of the child and the rights-based approach. Addressing these gaps and barriers would enhance effective access to intermediary services and improve South Africa's commitment to a child-sensitive and friendly justice system. It would strengthen commitment to the best interests of the child, align with universal human rights standards, and enhance overall access to a free and fair child justice system.

Declarations

Ethical consideration

The study obtained ethical clearance from the university's research ethics committee and the Limpopo Province Research Ethics Committee.

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Data availability statement

Research data are available on request

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