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The Dynamics of Foster Care in the Kingdom of Eswatini: Benefits, Challenges, and Strategies for Effective Foster Parenting

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Abstract: The study investigated the experience and challenges faced by children raised by foster parents in the Kingdom of Eswatini. It employed a Participatory Action Research (PAR) design guided by a transformative paradigm, which was fitting as it necessitated the direct participation of those being researched in the data generation process. A sample size of 15 participants was conveniently selected from the target population. Two research instruments, focus group discussions and interviews, were used to collect data, as they enabled the researchers to gather meaningful information through the participants' lived experiences. The Cultural History Activity Theory (CHAT) served as the theoretical framework for the study. The findings indicated that foster children experienced improved living standards, received attention to their emotional needs, enjoyed safety, and had access to care at the foster home. However, challenges such as adaptation issues, psychological difficulties, family disruption, and reintegration were prevalent among children in foster homes. Strategies identified from the study included training, assessment, reintegration, establishment of a legal framework, and assistance. The study concludes that while children raised in foster care often have better living standards, they may develop a dependency syndrome, making it challenging for them to adapt to life after ageing out of foster care.

Keywords: Foster care, adaptation, foster parenting, fostered children, Kingdom of Eswatini.

1. Introduction

The concept of foster care, while not traditionally prevalent, is gradually gaining traction and becoming more common across various countries. The protection of children has been outlined in child rights laws in several nations throughout the world. All nations, except for the USA, have ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which calls on all state parties to protect children, promote their survival and development, and always act in their best interests (United Nations General Assembly, 1989). Addy (2020) contends several varieties and sorts of foster care, including kinship care, official foster care, network care, and other types of foster care available in Western countries. The literature on the experiences of children in formal foster care is, however, largely lacking in African nations. This is perhaps because African nations are more familiar with familial care, which is common in many African contexts (Isiugo-Abanihe, 1983; Kuyini et al., 2009). In many situations, notably in Eswatini, formal foster care is a new addition to alternative care provision; as a result, little is known about it (Department of Social Welfare, 2018). Therefore, understanding how foster care affects children and the results is crucial for determining the best way to protect their interests.

Addy (2020) notes that foster care is one such option that provides alternative care for children to grow up in family-like settings. Thus, foster care is temporarily placing a child under a non-biological

family's care. Gasva and Mutanana (2016) describe a foster parent as any person caring for a non-biological child whose parents cannot do so for one reason or another. It includes a person providing full-time care of a child or children. Papovich (2019) posits that most children are removed from their biological homes due to cases of abuse and neglect. In Eswatini, for now, there is no policy on foster care. What the country has are guidelines on foster care. According to the Department of Social Welfare (2021), children should only be placed in alternative care if it is essential and in the child's best interests. Family and community-based care should always precede, with institutional care as a last choice. Every time it is practicable, efforts should be made to reunite families. The above statement indicates that the Kingdom of Eswatini does not believe in foster care. This is why there is not much literature on foster care in the Kingdom of Eswatini. It should, however, be noted that through the Department of Social Welfare, the Deputy Prime Minister's Office has stepped into child protection issues that have required the placement of children in alternative care for a variety of reasons, including the need for parental care, protection from abuse, exploitation, and maltreatment (Department of Social Welfare, 2021). This is why Eswatini now has foster homes dotted in the country's four regions.

Therefore, it is essential to conduct research into the well-being and experiences of children placed in foster homes. This study aims to delve into their experiences, providing critical insights and contributing to the literature on foster parenting within the country. Given the absence of a formal policy on foster care, the findings of this study could be instrumental in guiding governmental policy-making in this area. Considering the increasing number of children left without parental care due to factors such as divorce and the impact of pandemics like HIV/AIDS and COVID-19, the need for foster care as an alternative form of care is becoming more apparent. This situation may compel the country to adopt foster parenting as a necessary and viable option for child welfare.

1.1 Research Questions

This study aimed to explore the experiences of children raised in foster homes. Consequently, the following research questions were formulated to guide the study:

- What benefits do children experience when raised in foster homes?
- What challenges are faced by children raised in foster homes?
- What strategies could be adopted for effective foster parenting?

2. Theoretical framework

This study employs the Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), as delineated by Nickerson (2023), which asserts that human activities are best understood by examining the interplay of motivation, societal structures, rules, and methods of conducting activities within their cultural and historical contexts. Central to CHAT is the concept that awareness arises through participation in a social structure, where activities that utilise tools to create artefacts culminate in socially valued outcomes, as articulated by Masters (2016). The theory comprises seven components: subject, object, outcome, tool, rule, community, and division of labour, as identified by Andriani et al. (2020). In this study, the researchers themselves are the 'subject', representing the individual or subgroup from whose perspective the analysis is conducted, according to Sannino & Engestrom (2018). The 'object' of this activity, which Sannino & Engestrom (2018) define as the target or problem space of the activity, is to explore the experiences of foster children in the Kingdom of Eswatini, aiming to drive reforms for their betterment.

The 'tool' in this context, as Miles (2020) suggests, can be tangible, like a hammer, or intangible, such as a concept, theory, or knowledgeable individuals aiding the attainment of the object. For this study, the term 'tools' encompasses all elements used in foster parenting. This includes facilities in foster homes, policies guiding foster parenting, the foster parents themselves, individuals working with foster parents, religion, television, and social media, among others. We aimed to determine the

efficacy of these tools/artefacts in raising foster children. Additionally, we sought to identify which tools require modification to enhance the success of foster parenting. Mentz and De Beer (2021) describe 'rules' as the directives and policies shaping activities, such as guidelines for interviews and discussions, emphasising respect, freedom of expression, and confidentiality. The 'community' component, encompassing all stakeholders in the activity system (Mentz & De Beer, 2021), includes foster children, carers, and researchers/facilitators, all collaborating towards a common goal. 'Division of labour', as Sannino and Engestrom (2018) and Mentz and De Beer (2021) outline, involves the distribution of tasks and the hierarchical structuring of power and status, where researchers in this study take on various roles such as facilitation, question-answering, and response recording. CHAT thus offers a framework for analysing and exploring the interconnections within an activity system over a short period, as Krugell (2019) notes. In agreement, Miles (2020) states that the subject, as part of a community, engages in relationships mediated by rules, and the division of labour shapes the interplay between the community and the object. Therefore, CHAT theory is applied in this study to scrutinise the structure of activities and the conditions prevalent in the foster home environment.

2.1 Related literature

2.1.1 Benefits of children to be raised in foster homes

Foster care is an important worldwide strategy within child protection systems (Masha and Botha, 2021). Dhludhlu (2021) conducted a study involving social workers and care leavers in South Africa. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, and the findings revealed that foster care placement offers various opportunities, including the provision of basic needs, therapy or counselling services, a family environment and shelter, educational opportunities, recreational or extramural activities, poverty alleviation, and promotion of independence. Most children in foster care are vulnerable, orphaned, homeless, or rejected. Hence, the benefits of foster homes include stable homes, education, financial stability, access to health services, and a sense of community belonging.

Addy (2020) carried out an exploratory study on the experiences and perceptions of foster children and foster parents in formal foster care in Ghana using in-depth semi-structured interviews. Thematic findings from the research indicated that foster children enjoy better standards of care, feel a sense of belonging to their foster families concerning their well-being, and have limited contact with their biological families. This indicates that belongingness is a fundamental human need, encompassing acceptance, a sense of identity, and inclusion as a member of an entity, in this case, a family.

2.1.2 Challenges faced by children raised in foster homes

The challenges faced by children in foster homes are multifaceted and substantial. Masha and Botha (2021) conducted a study involving 13 social workers, revealing that a total of 236 foster children in South Africa were subjected to abuse and neglect during 2016 and 2017. The forms of maltreatment identified included physical neglect, physical abuse, emotional abuse and neglect, as well as sexual abuse and rape. Such abuse and neglect often result in re-traumatisation and the emergence of problematic behaviours among fostered children. Dorsey et al. (2012) noted that children experiencing unstable placements, particularly those with a history of abuse and neglect, are significantly more likely to develop behavioural problems compared to those in stable foster care environments.

Despite some children expressing contentment with their foster placements and feeling a strong sense of connection, certain practices, such as the use of corporal punishment, can become coercive. This impacts the participation and stability of foster care placements (Addy, 2020). While a new environment can positively transform the lives of vulnerable children, the power dynamics between children and adults in these settings often necessitate empowerment and advocacy for these children.

Liming et al. (2020) conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis on suicidality among young people in foster care compared to non-care populations. The findings indicated that individuals in foster care are over three times more likely to attempt suicide than their counterparts in the general population. Papovich (2019) highlighted the emotional trauma caused by the separation of siblings in many child welfare cases. The transition into foster care represents a major life alteration, often accompanied by mental health challenges such as loss, grief, and anxiety. In line with this, Jankowski et al. (2019) reported that children and youth in foster care exhibit increased mental health issues. Approximately half of the children and youth in child welfare systems were found to be at a 2.5 times greater risk of developing mental health disorders compared to those not involved in the child welfare system.

2.1.3 Strategies can be adopted for effective foster parenting

In Eswatini, significant progress has been made in enhancing child welfare, as highlighted by Kunene (2023) in a Times of Eswatini article. The Deputy Prime Minister acknowledged the launch of the Neighbourhood Care Points Strategy and a foster care program, which includes a notable initiative where chiefs are encouraged to adopt at least one orphaned child from local foster homes, facilitating their integration into the community as adults. This underscores the necessity for national investment in foster care. The importance of training foster parents, a fundamental aspect of the licensing process, is emphasised by Casey Family Programmes (2014), noting that adequately equipping foster parents to handle the behaviours of children in their care is crucial for retention. The implementation of standardised national foster care training, along with locally accessible and culturally relevant materials, is essential for the training and development of foster parents and other stakeholders. Furthermore, the new Children's Act in South Africa, as detailed by Keshavarzian (2015), establishes criteria for selecting foster carers and delineates their rights and responsibilities. Therefore, there is a pressing need for established standards and guiding policies to oversee the recruitment and assessment of foster parents or carers.

3. Methodology

The methodology in research is often conceptualised as the systematic approach to conducting research (Omodan, 2020). In exploring children's experiences with foster parents in the Kingdom of Eswatini, the researchers adopted a comprehensive methodology encompassing several key components. These included the research paradigm underpinning the study, the research design framework, the criteria for participant selection and the instruments utilised, the strategies for data analysis, and the ethical considerations integral to conducting the research responsibly and respectfully.

3.1 Research paradigm and design

Mattar & Ramos (2022) avows that a paradigm, also called by several authors "worldview", brings together several perspectives. Transformative paradigm is appropriate for studies that are based on social and emancipatory philosophy, approach and research design (Omodan, 2020). Thus, the children will be co-researchers who will be involved in sharing their lived experiences as well as knowledge construction as a solution to their challenges. In this study, the researchers ensured there was trust and an interactive relationship between the researchers and the researched community. Therefore, Omodan (2020) states that to transform/empower people, the quest for truth and maintenance of knowledge that is true must be practical. Hence, the need for collaboration with the beneficiaries in knowledge construction would empower/transform their lives.

The research utilised the Participatory Action Research (PAR) design to engage children in foster care in Eswatini. According to Delve (2022), PAR emphasises participation and action by the researcher, actively engaging all relevant parties in defining the research problems, developing questions, gathering data, data analysis, and preparing recommendations. PAR encourages the

participation of the children in the process of knowledge creation while educating and conscientising them. Barbon et al. (2021) defined PAR as a community-directed research process, meaning that community members work together with a researcher to empower themselves as they jointly investigate the community's issues and challenges. PAR acknowledges that children in foster are powerless and marginalised, with their marginalised position in society largely having been shaped by history. For Eswatini and most African nations, this history includes the collectivist nature and value of Ubuntu, which has shaped the country's dominant ideas around culture, religion as part of culture, the political system and the value system. In their collectivism, most African nations value the extended family, therefore emphasising familial care.

3.2 Selection of participants and instrumentation

Key informants were conveniently selected from a pool of stakeholders at the foster care institution. This convenient sampling method was chosen due to the accessibility of the parents and children in the foster care home. The study included 8 foster care children and 7 foster care parents as participants. These key informants were comprised of foster home carers and the foster children at the institution. The institution was selected for its geographical proximity and ease of access for the researchers. The children who participated in the focus group discussions (FGDs) were 4 males and 4 females, aged between 8 and 17 years. The group of foster parents consisted of 4 females and 3 males. The data collection involved conducting focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews using open-ended guides. The children participated in the FGDs to enable the researchers to capture their lived experiences and perspectives on foster care. The foster care parents were interviewed to gather insights based on their interactions with the children, thereby complementing the data obtained from the FGDs. With consent from the study participants, the researchers audio-recorded the FGDs and individual interviews to ensure comprehensive documentation.

3.3 Data analysis and Ethical considerations

The data collected was qualitative, necessitating a qualitative analysis process. The researchers listened to the audio recordings to comprehensively understand the participants' experiences. This information was then transcribed, validated, and coded to impart meaning to the data and facilitate its categorisation or the creation of themes. Coding was performed manually, and the coded data were categorised to form themes. Thematic analysis was employed to interpret the perspectives and lived experiences of foster care children and foster parents.

Regarding ethical guidelines, informed consent was a key consideration. Since the children did not have parents, consent was initially granted by the carers, acting as the children's legal guardians. Assent was sought from the foster children, allowing them to voluntarily agree to participate in the study. Confidentiality was rigorously maintained; it was clearly explained to the participants who would access the collected information and how it would be used post-research. The researchers assured that anonymity would be maintained in disseminating and publishing the research findings. The welfare of the children was given the highest priority. This pedagogical imperative obliged the researchers to ensure that the research and all related activities would cause no harm to the participants, including physical harm, anxiety, over-research, re-traumatisation, or distress.

4. Results

Data collection was conducted using focus group discussions with foster care children, with their responses and excerpts labelled as [FGD] in the analysis. To ensure a comprehensive and balanced dataset, interviews were also carried out with foster parents, and their responses were identified using [FP] as a pseudonym. The themes derived from the collected data were meticulously organised and aligned to address the research questions previously outlined.

4.1 Benefits of children raised by foster parents

This section outlines the sub-themes that address Research Question One. These include safety needs, enhancement of living standards, emotional requirements, and the need for attention.

4.1.1 Safety needs

Participants from the focus group expressed that foster care was beneficial in that, "*foster care afforded me the opportunity to get decent shelter*". For some of the FGD participants, the major advantage was their reunion with their siblings, "*foster home afforded me an opportunity to reunite with my siblings as after the death of our parents we were given to different relatives*". In emphasis of safety, one of the foster parents from the interview indicated that "*children are safe from perpetrators when they are in foster care*". From the extracts above it is clear that the foster children experienced stability, environmental safety and security in foster care.

4.1.2 Improved standards of living

During the FGD, the children in the foster care indicated that the foster care ensured that they had a better upbringing environment, as expressed in the following quotations.

> **[FGD]** *When I was living with my aunt, I had stopped going to school, she said she had no money to pay for my school fees. Since I came into this new home, I managed to return to school, which is better than the one I went to when my parents were alive.*

> **[FGD]** *My parents never afforded to get me a full uniform and sometimes I would be sent back home for lack of school fees and sometimes to get books. But since I have been in foster, when I go to school, some of my classmates envy me because I always look good and have everything that is required at school.*

> **[FGD]** *There is food provision, there is no night I go without a decent meal*

The above extracts indicate that the children reflected on their experiences as better than before as most attested to having access to all the basic needs such as education, food, and clothes.

4.1.3 Emotional needs

Children in foster care, as found in this study, had experienced emotional development, expressed by one participant in the following excerpt.

> "*Learned how to help others without having to go through their problems or situations*"

The above excerpt highlights how foster care has promoted emotional development and support for foster children. To complement this information, a foster parent had to say in the following excerpt.

> **[FP]** *Emotional benefit is where they tend to emulate the foster parents` good moral behaviours and how to manage anger issues as well as conflict resolution skills. Such positive life skills can be learned in the foster care family, including problem-solving skills and gender role-appropriate conduct. Foster care upbringing boosts the child`s confidence.*

The above quotation indicates that the child's emotional needs are prioritised as the child is taught emotional management in the foster home.

4.1.4 Attention

One of the benefits found in this study is attention, as indicated by the following extracts.

> *[FDG] I also benefited spiritually by being a Christian in the foster home*
>
> *[FP] Foster parents can also identify deviant behaviours like drug abuse and deal with them early in life in order to create a well-rounded individual. Identifying such deviant behaviours is easier when the child is alone than when they are in a crowd, as in a Residential Care Facility where they stay as a large group.*
>
> *[FP] Growing up in a family setting is more advantageous than growing up outside the family unit in that the family will provide motherly or fatherly love, which is crucial for the upbringing of the foster child.*
>
> *[FGD] I went to Israel, a country I have always dreamt of visiting.*

From the above excerpts, it is highlighted that foster care ensures that the children have the attention they need. There is close monitoring and care. From the activities described by the foster children, one can deduce the happiness expressed as their foster families took time for leisure, and this inclusion indicated love and care. In simple terms, the mentioned activities, such as going for holidays, going to church, and other events as a family, created a sense of belongingness and value.

4.2 Challenges faced by children raised by foster parents

The challenges faced by children raised in foster care can be influenced by specific behaviours and the parenting approaches of the institution. Several sub-theme themes emerged: adaptation, psychological problems, destruction of family and reintegration.

4.2.1 Adaptation

Adaption was the research findings in this study regarding challenges faced by foster children. Some of the children remarked

> *[FGD] Adapting to living with children from other backgrounds is quite challenging.*
>
> *[FP] Adapting to the new family environment is often a huge challenge for the children. The child takes time to fit into the new family's way of life.*

From the above extracts, coping with placement in a new environment was a top challenge, as all the FGD participants agreed. Foster care usually provides an institutional set-up whereby one participant remarked.

> *[FGD] I Missed a proper family set-up with my father and mother, and it affected me emotionally.*
>
> *[FP] The biological children may also reject the foster child no matter how much you try to get them to accept the foster child; such a reality can channel the foster child to deviant behaviours owing to rejection. There are some children who will say; `I don't feel her/ him`… this is not our brother… this is not our sister`. Your own biological children may raise concerns such as; `because you are here we no longer get chocolate any more,` creating disharmony and tension in the family. Such developments will delay the foster child`s adaptation to the new foster home.*

Given the above, children who have been displaced from a background where they had biological parents would find it difficult to call someone else their parent. Furthermore, foster children may find it difficult to adjust to the new family set-up, where they may sometimes face resistance and rejection by relatives or children of their foster parents.

4.2.2 Psychological problems

In this study, psychological problems have been found to be one of the major challenges faced by children raised in foster care. These emanated in the form of emotional trauma, separation anxiety and lack of quality time with foster parents.

> *[FGD] Love and care are not something that you get all the time.*

> *[FGD] I was traumatised by calling someone a mother or a father when I actually knew he/she was not my parent.*

> *[FP] The child needs to adjust to the new circumstances of being in another family, depending on the age of the child. There are different backgrounds to these children. For example, if an abandoned child does not have a known family background, and all of a sudden, the child finds him/herself with new parents, there are bound to be genuine concerns about tomorrow, e.g. what will become of me if the family throws the child out of their home. Such children suffer an identity crisis the rest of their lives, affecting their emotional upbringing.*

Given the above extracts, it is evident that children who might have been separated from their parents for reasons such as death or abuse had a different perception of foster care. Not all of them appreciated the new home or better standards of living. Fear of the unknown has been highlighted; once abandoned, the child will fear rejection and resistance from a new family.

4.2.3 Destruction of family

According to this research, family destruction has been found as one of the challenges faced by children in foster homes.

> *[FP] Family members are mostly not involved/forgotten during the development of the child and decision-making due to policies and rules inputted by the facility.*

> *[FP] Destroys family bonds and destroys the values and cultures of their biological communities.*

The above quotations indicate that placing a child in foster care insinuates that their family unit is destructed, and most times, biological parental involvement in the child's life becomes limited.

4.2.4 Reintegration

Some children are raised in foster care from a tender age, which means that they are confined to an institution where their socialisation is limited. Findings indicated that going back into the community was deemed a challenge.

> *[FP] It is difficult to reintegrate them back to their homes, which always flood the institutional care.*

> *[FP] Difficult to think out of the box since the rules of the institutional facility always guide them.*

Presented with the above excerpts, it can be alluded that in foster care, a child's development is usually cushioned regarding the child's best interests, which means that they are provided with the most basic needs and close watch so as not to leave the home. Coherently, the children might develop a dependency syndrome as well as a lack of social skills caused by a lack of interaction outside the institution.

4.3 Strategies that could be adopted for foster parenting

Several strategies for effective foster parenting were suggested by both the foster children and the foster parents.

4.3.1 Assessment

Findings from the research indicated that there was a need for assessment and training of foster parents prior to accepting a child to foster. The following quotations indicate the participants' perspectives.

> *[FP] The first thing to do is a proper and thorough inspection or assessment of the foster parents and their living conditions. It must not be something done hurriedly like I am taking a child for fostering. There is a greater need for foster parents be trained very well.*

> *[FP] The foster parents` financial background must be thoroughly interrogated in cases where they are not financially stable; there has to be the consideration of income-generating projects to be availed to foster parents to ensure the sustainability of foster care by guaranteeing a steady flow of income.*

The quotations suggest that before becoming a foster parent, individuals must undergo a comprehensive assessment encompassing financial status, living standards, and moral character. It is also imperative to assess foster parents and their extended family to prevent intra-family conflicts. Prospective foster parents should receive training on managing potential situations, including conflicts, disciplinary issues, and behavioural challenges that a foster child might exhibit. These assessments and training sessions are crucial to minimise the frequent relocation of children from one home to another and to reduce the number of times children are introduced to new parents.

> *[FGD] Getting a permanent foster parent as changing foster care parents is confusing us.*

From the above extract, it can be implied that children raised in foster care are distressed and emotionally traumatised by being constantly exposed to strangers as caregivers or family. It doesn't have to end up with assessment and training, as one foster parent said below.

> *[FP] Follow-up visits: The social welfare department needs to carry out periodic follow-up visits to check if the fostering programmes are going according to plan or if there are issues that may need urgent attention.*

The above extract implies that follow-ups are needed to reassess, review and monitor the foster care conditions and relationships.

4.3.2 Reintegration

Research findings indicated that exposure was a good strategy to improve foster parenting. FGD most participants agreed that they were always confined to one place. Participants remarked that

> *[FGD] Exposing us to society rather than confining us to the foster home. We end up lacking social skills due to lack of exposure.*

It can, therefore, be alluded that the situation within the foster care environment contradicts many developmental needs of young children, such as the need for an opportunity to mingle with peers outside the home as well as to explore and experience different social environments. Some with the hope of re-joining their families after foster care remarked that.

> *[FGD] They should allow us to visit our parents early, not when we are old. It makes us angry and feel like they owe us many explanations. We can be allowed to visit our families during school holidays.*

The above extract indicates how most children desire to connect and keep in contact with their biological families.

4.3.3 Legal framework

According to research findings from this study, setting up legal frameworks and policies was found to be a strategy that could be adopted for foster parenting. This was highlighted in the following extracts.

> *[FP] Although there are positive developments in this regard, a lot still needs to be done so that Alternative care receives the backing of local legal frameworks. Lately, a new section was promulgated that legalises foster parenting and also allows women to register their children in their maiden surnames.*

> *[FP] The Government must develop policies and children development plans that can keep the family strong and keep families living together before taking any other care options. All the policies should have a road map for institutional homes.*

> *[FP] Until recently, we were relying on an outdated policy pushing for Residential Care Facilities, yet the whole world including the UN is now pushing for Alternative Care facilities, particularly foster care. This was due to cultural considerations that say, 'it takes a village to raise a child,' implying that everyone is responsible for raising a child in a family.*

From the above extracts, it can be concluded that foster care has no clear guidelines. Policies have to be reviewed, and legal frameworks have to be drafted so as to guide foster parenting as well as ensure there's harmony and order.

4.3,4 Support

From the research, support has been found to be one of the key strategies that could be adopted for foster parenting.

> *[FP] Provision of meaningful grants- the government must seriously consider giving foster care grants like they do for orphaned children under (OVC grants) to pay school fees and other related requirements to reduce the burden of fostering on foster parents. This is because most organisations involved in foster care don't have enough financial resources to take care of all the daily needs of foster children.*

> *[FP] Involvement of more Non-Governmental Organizations to help fund Alternative care facilities and foster parenting in particular, the urgent involvement of NGOs would be a move in the right direction in order to decrease the chances of these children ending up destitute in the streets. We have local NGOs, e.g. SOS specialising in foster care, Bulembu is starting Kinship care, but currently, none is focusing on Adoption Care, though these organisations can also explore it and is lagging behind owing to a lack of legislative frameworks.*

The above extracts allude to the fact that so much support must be offered to foster parents through grants to ease their financial burdens. The involvement of different stakeholders in foster care issues means more hands on deck, hence good welfare for foster children. Foster children need continuous support until they become independent, they remarked.

> *[FGD] Those who get pregnant at foster homes should not be sent home but continue being looked after in the foster home together with their babies. These need also to be afforded counselling opportunities.*

> *[FGD] Foster homes are not giving up on children who are not academically gifted. I suggest these children must be sent to TVET centres to learn various skills.*

From the above excerpts, it can be implied that foster parents should offer continual support in any way until the children age independently and are out of foster care. Necessary skills should be taught to these children without discrimination so that they can be better equipped for transition into adulthood.

5. Discussion

Research findings indicated that the foster children had better or improved standards of living as compared to their life before placement into foster care. Having better shelter and food infuses a sense of safety and belongingness, which is consistent with Wissö et al. (2019), who avowed that children placed in foster care often considered the foster home their home even before a custody transfer. As indicated, the benefit of improved living standards resonates with Addy's (2020) research, which found that foster children had better standards of care, and they felt a sense of belonging to their foster families regarding their well-being and a good sense of connectedness.

This study revealed that emotional needs were met in the foster home. Addy (2020) purports that family rituals involve shared emotions that generate solidarity and group membership, which concurs with the current study. Foster children are delicate because of their previous experiences; besides physical needs, they also need psychological and emotional support for them to have normal development and growth.

Children require quality time with their parents or caregivers, and as indicated by the findings, there's no desired attention or time for bonding. Gasva and Mutanana (2016) posit that some foster parents have limited time for interaction with their foster children; hence, one of the common trends among foster children is that most of them are maladjusted and have problems trying to cope with the pressures and challenges of foster care. In consonance, Family for Every Child (2014) highlights that some foster carers viewed themselves as just 'placeholders for the children', without the commitment or the emotional engagement needed to work with children who may have experienced severe trauma, abuse and neglect. Quality time could be attributed to the number of children assigned to a caregiver, and in most cases, the foster homes are short-staffed such that the ratio of caregiver to child is imbalanced.

This study revealed that many children faced challenges in adapting to new foster homes. Taylor (2018), in agreement with the finding, asserts that foster youth often endure trauma stemming from being displaced and the resulting changes in their environment. In another illustration, each time a child is relocated to a new foster home, their development may regress by as much as six months (Kang-Y & Adams, 2015). Some children struggle to adjust to environments that differ significantly from their previous settings, potentially leading to isolation, running away, or the manifestation of various psychological issues.

Furthermore, the study identified that children in foster care frequently encounter psychological problems. Traumatic experiences, such as the death of a parent, neglect, and abuse, can predispose a child to emotional, physical, and social difficulties. These experiences may also hinder their ability to form trusting relationships with caregivers, siblings, and others in the community (Mann & Delap, 2020). The disruption of family units and placement in multiple foster homes often subjects these children to separation and loss, exacerbating mental health challenges (Bartlett & Rushovich, 2018). These findings are in harmony with the results of this study.

It emerged from this study that the destruction of families was one of the challenges encountered by children in foster care. Foster children who did not know their biological parents and siblings did not feel as much pain of separation or detachment from their biological family as foster children who experienced the separation or death of their parent or parents (Gasva & Mutanana, 2016). For those children whose parent(s) are gravely ill or have died or from whom they have been unintentionally separated by conflict or natural disaster, moving to a new household may trigger or be accompanied by feelings of deep sadness and anguish (Mann & Delap, 2020). Therefore, this study is congruent with other studies; thus, in foster care, as children are sometimes not connected to their biological families or relatives for various reasons, families get disrupted.

It was established from this study that in foster care, one of the challenges faced by the children is reintegration, they are always protected, and their movement is highly monitored. Many youths who are out of foster care have lived most of their lives in a protected environment, some in the hands of strangers, such as officials of the courts and social welfare services, and some with families who are not blood relatives (Mogale 2019). This situation within the foster care environment contradicts many developmental needs of young children, such as the need to be with peers outside the home and to explore and experience different social environments (Gasva & Mutanana, 2016). Thus, exposure to different social milieus is needed to gain social skills and links with biological families. Even if children in foster care are not reunified, families of origin can be an important resource for children as they become adults and are no longer eligible for foster care (Keshavarzian, 2015). Family can be a resource a child might make use of as they reintegrate into the community.

Assessment and training emerged from this study as one of the strategies to be adopted by foster parents. The then acting director of the Department of Social Welfare in Eswatini, Ms Dube, as Thwala (2021) reported, announced that eligibility to become a foster parent was being assessed by a social worker and was above 25 years old. Hence, cohabiting couples, single persons, house ownership, bankruptcy, and stay-at-home parents were not necessary to qualify for foster parenting. However, proper recruitment, careful assessment and support of foster carers are imperative for successful foster services. Support mechanisms may include associations of foster carers, access to specialist help and advice, as well as financial support (Family for Every Child, 2014). In harmony with this study, Font & Gershoff (2020) note that foster care should go through background checks for professional standards, maltreatment and crime before licensure. It is important for human service professionals to seek the proper education, preparation, and training necessary when working with individuals who are victims of childhood maltreatment/neglect.

It emerged from this study that reintegration was an important strategy to be adopted by foster parents. Addy's (2020) study found that some children were anxious about the whereabouts of their parents since they had not met them in several years, which resonates with this study. Children indicated that they needed to know their parents earlier in life, not wait until they got older. Furthermore, the United National General Assembly 1989, cited by Addy (2020), propounded that Article 9 subsection 3 of the UNCRC stated that "State parties shall respect the right of the child who is separated from one or both parents to maintain personal relations and direct contact with both parents on a regular basis, except if it is contrary to the child's best interests. Connections with biological families are thus imperative; as children age out of foster care, they will be able to use the family resources. Exposure to the community and social world makes them easily navigate various societal networks. Harmoniously with this study, Gasva and Mutanana (2016) assert that some children in foster homes found it difficult to make friends outside the foster home and consequently ended up developing antisocial behaviours, low esteem and no confidence.

This study revealed the legal framework as one of the strategies to be adopted by foster parents. Buchumi (2021) It is crucial to have a legal framework that takes into consideration all these realities (some prefer taking care of children they are blood-related while some do not mind if any relation

exists), accommodating the customs and traditions and at the same time taking into consideration the changing nature of society. In harmony with this study, which indicates that it is imperative that the state and agencies develop policies and legal frameworks, Font and Gershoff (2020) note that in foster care, federal policy provides a range of guidelines. There is a need for coordinated and robust policies and legal frameworks to provide the basis for foster care systems, including placement and aftercare facilities.

From the research findings, it is evident that little research has been done on the plight of foster children who get pregnant or fail to excel academically. Ogbonna (2021) explores strategies used by foster care social work case managers to help youth successfully age out of foster care, including housing resources, social support, etc. Goemans et al. (2018) note that placement disruption may be more likely for children with social skills deficits, poor coping skills, and educational challenges. Foster care should not release children who are not emancipated and independent, as releasing half-baked people into society with poor skills and social skills deficits could lead to them developing socially undesirable behaviours. It is imperative to have ongoing efforts to build the capacity of foster carers and those supporting foster care through training, supervision and mentorship (Family for Every Child, 2014). In terms of support, the law should be amended to include a provision on how foster families are to be assisted in providing the day-to-day needs of children placed in their care (Buchumi, 2021).

6. Conclusion and Limitations

In a nutshell, a family is the most important unit when it comes to a child's social, emotional, physical, and mental development; hence, the need to ensure that every child grows in a family, be it biological, kinship or foster family. The experiences of children raised by foster parents can consequently be an empowering tool for society and the state to assess the existing approaches so as to modify or devise new strategies to ensure the emancipation of foster children. Children deprived of familial care have the right to be protected by society for their development and survival. However, a substantial literature gap remains related to recent legal frameworks and policies on foster care. There is limited availability of data on foster care outcomes, limited studies in Africa on foster care, and most studies are Eurocentric.

7. Recommendations

The researchers offered recommendations based on the study's findings. Foster care is increasingly being adopted in Eswatini, underscoring the need for appropriate legal frameworks and policies to guide these services. It is crucial to raise awareness and educate families and communities about foster care, considering the significant influence of cultural traditions on childcare implementation. In reality, there is a pressing need for professional services, including therapy, training, assessment, and counselling for both parents and children to foster preparedness and mental health support. The government needs to strategise and implement transitional interventions for foster children as they age out of the system, ensuring they are equipped with the necessary knowledge, skills, and capacity for successful reintegration. Engaging various stakeholders, such as Faith-Based Organisations, Non-Governmental Organizations, and Social Workers, is essential to strategise and plan interventions that will benefit foster children.

8. Declarations

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