

Factors affecting the educational outcomes of youth in foster care: A collective case study design

BY

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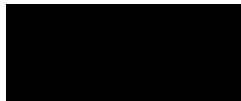
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DECLARATION (PLAGIARISM)

I, JOTHIE RANI PERUMAL, declare that:

This thesis is my own original work and was not submitted for any other degree. It contains no external content unless properly acknowledged, with all sources appropriately referenced. Text, graphics, or tables from the internet are only included if explicitly cited with the source in the References section.

Signed



Date: 31 March 2025

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DEDICATION

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ABSTRACT

Foster care is an vital component in South Africa's child protection system and remains the preferred option for children unable to reside with their biological parents. This study sought to gain a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing successful educational outcomes for foster youth by listening to the voices of those who progressed to tertiary education, those who dropped out of school, as well as their foster parents and social workers.

Using a qualitative approach, the study utilised a comparative collective case study design, allowing for the selection of multiple cases to capture diverse perspectives. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with foster youth and foster parents, as well as semi-structured interviews and focus groups with social workers. This was further complemented by an in-depth analysis of case files. A total of 15 foster youth who advanced to tertiary education, 15 who dropped out of school, 15 foster parents, and 16 social workers participated in the study. Thematic analysis served as the foundation for data analysis, guided by the capability approach and critical theory as theoretical frameworks to provide deeper insights into the educational experiences of foster youth.

The study provided unique insights into the experiences of foster youth that progressed to tertiary education and found that social support played a vital role in fostering positive educational outcomes for youth in care. Foster parents, educators, peers, and friends all played an important role in encouraging and assisting foster youth in their academic journeys. Additionally, many foster youth who progressed to tertiary education demonstrated remarkable resilience, overcoming adversity and remaining highly motivated to build a better future for themselves.

Despite government efforts to improve educational access for disadvantaged communities, particularly through the quintile system, the study found that the education system continues to fail the majority of the population. This points to the need for a comprehensive review and restructuring of the quintile system to ensure equitable access to quality education.

The study also revealed that while social workers have a pivotal role in supporting foster youth, they are often overwhelmed by administrative and bureaucratic demands, leading them to neglect the core ethical principles of their profession. This reduces their capacity to provide meaningful support to foster youth and their families.

Based on these findings, recommendations are made to address systemic inequalities and poverty, re-evaluate the quintile system, and strengthen the partnership between Designated Child Protection Organisations and the Department of Social Development. At the practice level, improvements in services for foster youth and their families are recommended, and further research is proposed to explore effective strategies for enhancing educational outcomes for foster youth.

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1 – Demographics of the foster youth

Table 2 – Demographics of the foster parents

Table 3 – Demographics of the social workers

LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – Request for permission to conduct research at Child Protection Organizations (CPO's)

Appendix 2 – Permission letters from CPOs

Appendix 3 – Ethical approval from UKZN

Appendix 4 – Interview themes with the foster youth

Appendix 5 – Interview themes with the foster parents

Appendix 6 – Interview and focus group themes with the social workers

Appendix 7 – Data extraction form

Appendix 8 – Informed consent for foster youth (English)

Appendix 9 – Informed consent for foster youth (IsiZulu)

Appendix 10 – Informed consent for foster parents (English)

Appendix 11 – Informed consent for foster parents (IsiZulu)

Appendix 12 – Informed consent for social workers

Appendix 13 – Confirmation of counselling services

Appendix 14 – Turn-it-in report

LIST OF ACRONYMS

ACRONYM	MEANING
ACRWC	African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of Children
CPO	Child Protection Organization
CPS	Child Protection System
CSG	Child Support Grant
CYCC	Child and Youth Care Centre
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
DCPO	Designated Child Protection Organisation
DOE	Department of Education
DSD	Department of Social Development
FCG	Foster Care Grant
FCS	Foster Care System
NACCW	National Association for Child Care Workers
NSFAS	National Student Financial Aid Scheme
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NPM	New Public Management
NPO	Non-Profit Organisations
OVC	Orphans and Vulnerable Children
SASSA	South African Social Security Agency

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DECLARATION – PLAGIARISM	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
DEDICATION	iv
ABSTRACT	v
LIST OF TABLES	vii
LIST OF APPENDICES	vii
LIST OF ACRONYMS	viii
TABLE OF CONTENTS	ix
SECTION ONE: INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY	1
1.1 INTRODUCTION	1
1.2 BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY	1
1.3 PROBLEM STATEMENT	5
1.4 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY	7
1.5 LOCATION OF THE STUDY	9
1.6 AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY	10
1.7 QUESTIONS TO BE ANSWERED IN THE RESEARCH	10
1.8 UNDERLYING ASSUMPTIONS OF THE STUDY	10
1.9 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY	11
1.9.1 CAPABILITY APPROACH	11
1.9.2 CRITICAL THEORY	16
1.10 DEFINITION OF TERMS	19
1.11 STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS	21
SECTION TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW	24
CHAPTER TWO: FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO CHILDREN NEEDING CARE AND PROTECTION	25
2.1 INTRODUCTION	25
2.2 DEFINITION OF A CHILD	25
2.3 RIGHTS OF THE CHILD	25
2.4 THE GLOBAL CONTEXT OF CHILDREN	26
2.5 THE ROLE OF FAMILIES IN CARING FOR CHILDREN	27
2.5.1 FAMILIES DEFINED	27
2.5.2 FAMILIES IN SOUTH AFRICA	28
2.6 THE IMPACT OF POVERTY ON FAMILIES AND CHILDREN IN SOUTH AFRICA	30
2.7 THE IMPACT OF HIV/AIDS ON CHILDREN AND FAMILIES	32
2.7.1 SOUTH AFRICAN GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE TO SUPPORTING FAMILIES	35
2.8 CHILD ABUSE, NEGLECT AND ABANDONMENT	39
2.8.1 CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT	39
2.8.2 CHILD ABANDONMENT	40
2.9 DOMESTIC VIOLENCE	41
2.10 SUBSTANCE ABUSE	42
2.11 CARE AND PROTECTION OF CHILDREN IN SOUTH AFRICA	43
2.12 WHITE PAPER ON FAMILIES	44
2.13 WHITE PAPER FOR SOCIAL WELFARE, 1997	45

2.14	THE IMPACT OF NEOLIBERALISM AND NEW PUBLIC MANAGEMENT ON SOCIAL WORK AND FAMILIES	45
2.15	CONCLUSION	49
CHAPTER THREE: PLACEMENT OF CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE		50
3.1	INTRODUCTION	50
3.2	INTERNATIONAL INSTRUMENTS ON THE CARE AND PROTECTION OF CHILDREN	50
3.3	BRIEF GLOBAL CONTEXT OF ALTERNATIVE CARE	52
3.4	CARE OF CHILDREN IN AFRICA	53
3.5	ALTERNATIVE CARE IN SOUTH AFRICA	54
	<i>3.5.1 SOUTH AFRICAN LEGISLATION PERTAINING TO THE CARE AND PROTECTION OF CHILDREN</i>	54
	3.5.1.1 South African Constitution, 1996	54
	3.5.1.2 Children's Act, 2005	54
3.6	MODELS OF CARE FOR CHILDREN IN SOUTH AFRICA	58
3.7	FOSTER CARE IN SOUTH AFRICA	60
	<i>3.7.1 FOSTER CARE CRISIS</i>	60
	<i>3.7.2 THE PROCESSES IN THE PLACEMENT OF CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE</i>	62
	3.7.2.1 Removal of children and emergency placements	62
	3.7.2.2 Screening of proposed foster parents	65
	<i>3.7.3 EXPERIENCES OF FOSTER YOUTH IN CARE</i>	66
	3.7.3.1 Toxic shame and stigma	66
	3.7.3.2 Breakdown of foster placements	69
	<i>3.7.4 THE ROLE OF THE FOSTER FAMILY IN PROVIDING CARE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE</i>	71
	3.7.4.1 Types of Caregiving	71
	3.7.4.1.1 Secure Base Model	71
	3.7.4.1.2 Developmental re-parenting	73
	3.7.4.1.3 Caring for Adolescents	73
3.8	THE ROLE OF SOCIAL WORKERS IN SUPERVISING FOSTER CARE PLACEMENTS	74
	<i>3.8.1 FOSTER YOUTH'S EXPECTATION OF THEIR SOCIAL WORKERS</i>	75
3.9	VOICES OF YOUTH IN CARE	76
3.10	CONCLUSION	77
CHAPTER FOUR: FOSTER CARE AND EDUCATION		78
4.1	INTRODUCTION	78
4.2	EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA	78
	<i>4.2.1 INEQUALITY IN EDUCATION: PRE-APARTHEID</i>	78
	<i>4.2.2 TRANSFORMING EDUCATION: POST-APARTHEID</i>	79
	4.2.2.1 Legislative Framework	79
	4.2.2.1.1 South African Constitution, 1996	79
	4.2.2.1.2 The South African Schools Act, 1996	79
	4.2.2.1.3 White Paper on Education and Training, 1995	80
	4.2.2.2 Equity in funding of public schools	81
	4.2.2.3 Curriculum changes	83
	4.2.2.4 Educator knowledge and expertise	83

4.2.3	SCHOOL DROP-OUT	84
4.2.4	IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION AND REDUCING DROP-OUT RATES	85
4.2.5	PROGRESS TO TERTIARY EDUCATION	88
4.3	FOSTER YOUTH AND EDUCATION	89
4.3.1	FACTORS THAT PROMOTE POSITIVE EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES FOSTER YOUTH	89
4.3.1.1	Legislation and policies	89
4.3.1.2	Placement in foster care	90
4.3.1.3	Supportive foster parents	91
4.3.1.4	Education system	92
4.3.1.5	Peer support	93
4.3.1.6	The social worker's role	93
4.3.1.7	Resilience and aspirations	94
4.3.2	BARRIERS TO FOSTER YOUTH ACHIEVING POSITIVE EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES	96
4.3.2.1	Pre-placement trauma, emotional and behavioural factors and peer pressure	96
4.3.2.1.1	Pre-placement trauma	96
4.3.2.1.2	Emotional and behavioural factors	97
4.3.2.1.3	Peer pressure	98
4.3.2.2	Maltreatment in the foster home	98
4.3.2.3	Challenges faced by foster parents	99
4.3.2.4	Placement instability and school mobility	100
4.3.2.5	The school system and environment	101
4.3.2.6	The social worker and the foster care system	102
4.4	CONCLUSION	103
CHAPTER FIVE: TRANSITIONING OUT OF FOSTER CARE		105
5.1	INTRODUCTION	105
5.2	SOUTH AFRICAN LEGISLATION AND GUIDELINES FOR YOUTH TRANSITIONING OUT OF CARE	105
5.3	EMERGING ADULTHOOD	106
5.4	LACK OF PREPARATION FOR AND OUTCOMES OF TRANSITIONING FROM FOSTER CARE	107
5.4.1	LACK OF PREPARATION	107
5.4.2	OUTCOMES FOR YOUTH TRANSITIONING OUT OF CARE	108
5.4.2.1	Post-secondary outcomes	108
5.4.2.2	Employment outcomes	110
5.4.2.3	Housing	110
5.4.2.4	Stigma, mental and health outcomes	111
5.4.3	Supportive relationships, social networks and resilience	111
5.5	INDEPENDENT LIVING PROGRAMMES FOR YOUTH IN ALTERNATIVE CARE	113
5.6	SOCIAL WORKER'S ROLE	115
5.7	CONCLUSION	116

SECTION THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY	117
CHAPTER SIX: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY	117
6.1 INTRODUCTION	117
6.2 RESEARCH PARADIGM	117
6.3 RESEARCH DESIGN	119
6.4 SELECTING THE SAMPLE	121
6.4.1 TYPES OF SAMPLING	121
6.4.2 NONPROBABILITY SAMPLING TECHNIQUES	121
6.4.3 LOCATION OF THE STUDY	122
6.4.4. STUDY POPULATION	122
6.4.5 SAMPLE FRAME	123
6.5 DATA COLLECTION	128
6.5.1 PREPARING FOR FIELDWORK	128
6.5.1.1 Methods of data collection	128
6.5.1.1.1 Interviews	128
6.5.1.1.2 Focus groups	130
6.5.1.1.3 Case file analysis	130
6.5.1.2 Data recording procedures	131
6.5.1.3 Pilot testing	131
6.5.2 CONDUCTING DATA COLLECTION	132
6.5.2.1 Data collection with foster youth that progressed to tertiary education and school leavers	134
6.5.2.2 Data collection with foster parents	135
6.5.2.3 Data Collection with social workers	137
6.5.2.4 Data collection from case files	138
6.6 DATA ANALYSIS	139
6.6.1 TRANSCRIPTION AND FAMILIARISATION WITH THE DATA	140
6.6.2 ANALYSING THE DATA	140
6.7 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS	141
6.7.1 VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION	141
6.7.2 INFORMED WRITTEN CONSENT	142
6.7.3 ANONYMITY	142
6.7.4 CONFIDENTIALITY	142
6.7.5 NO HARM TO THE PARTICIPANTS	143
6.8 TRUSTWORTHINESS OF THE STUDY	144
6.8.1 CREDIBILITY	144
6.8.2 TRANSFERABILITY	145
6.8.3 DEPENDABILITY	146
6.8.4 CONFIRMABILITY	146
6.9 REFLEXIVITY	147
6.10 LIMITATIONS	148
6.11 CONCLUSION	149

SECTION FOUR: RESULTS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	150
CHAPTER SEVEN: DEMOGRAPHICS OF THE PARTICIPANTS AND LIFE EXPERIENCES OF FOSTER YOUTH	151
7.1 DEMOGRAPHICS OF THE PARTICIPANTS	151
7.2 THEME: LIFE EXPERIENCES OF FOSTER YOUTH	160
7.2.1 <i>GETTING INTO CARE</i>	160
7.2.1.1 Orphanhood	160
7.2.1.2 Abandonment	162
7.2.1.3 Child abuse and neglect	163
7.2.2 <i>"I DID NOT KNOW I WAS A FOSTER CHILD"</i>	165
7.2.3 <i>KIN VERSUS NON-KIN: STABILITY AND DURATION OF PLACEMENTS</i>	167
7.2.4 <i>: FOSTER YOUTH'S INCREASED RESPONSIBILITIES IN THE FOSTER HOME</i>	169
7.2.5 <i>CONNECTING WITH SIBLINGS AND BIOLOGICAL FAMILIES</i>	170
7.2.6 <i>BELONGING AND IDENTITY</i>	173
7.2.7 <i>ADOLESCENCE BEHAVIOURAL PROBLEMS</i>	174
7.2.8 <i>PHYSICAL WELL-BEING</i>	177
7.2.9 <i>TRAUMA</i>	178
7.2.10 <i>ABUSE IN THE FOSTER HOME</i>	180
7.2.11 <i>STIGMA, SHAME AND DISCRIMINATION</i>	182
7.3 THEME: SOCIAL WORKERS: CONTACT, ACADEMIC SUPPORT AND PERSONAL ATTRIBUTES	184
7.3.1 <i>CONTACT WITH THE SOCIAL WORKER: PERSPECTIVES OF FOSTER YOUTH AND FOSTER PARENTS</i>	184
7.3.2 <i>ACADEMIC SUPPORT</i>	188
7.3.3 <i>PERSONAL ATTRIBUTES OF SOCIAL WORKERS</i>	189
7.4 CONCLUSION	190
CHAPTER EIGHT: FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO OR IMPEDE THE EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES OF FOSTER YOUTH	192
8.1 INTRODUCTION	192
8.2 RESILIENCE, MOTIVATION AND ASPIRATIONS	192
8.3 SUPPORTIVE AND NURTURING HOME ENVIRONMENTS	196
8.3.1 <i>RELATIONSHIPS WITH FOSTER PARENTS</i>	196
8.3.2 <i>ACADEMIC SUPPORT FROM FOSTER PARENTS</i>	198
8.3.3 <i>SUPPORT FROM FOSTER SIBLINGS AND OTHER FAMILY MEMBERS</i>	201
8.4 THE EDUCATION SYSTEM	203
8.4.1 <i>SCHOOL PLACEMENTS</i>	203
8.4.1.1 Post-secondary students' school attendance	204
8.4.1.2 School leavers' school attendance	205
8.4.2 <i>SCHOOL MOBILITY</i>	210
8.4.3 <i>THE ROLE OF EDUCATORS</i>	211
8.4.4 <i>EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND AND SKILLS</i>	217
8.4.4.1 Special learning needs	218
8.4.4.2 Grade repetition and progressing the youth into the next grade	222

8.4.5	<i>EXTRA-CURRICULAR INVOLVEMENT</i>	224
8.5	PEERS AND FRIENDS	225
8.6	CONCLUSION	227
CHAPTER NINE: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION		229
9.1	INTRODUCTION	229
9.2	MAJOR CONCLUSIONS	230
	9.2.1 <i>GETTING INTO CARE: ORPHANHOOD, ABANDONMENT, NEGLECT AND ABUSE</i>	230
	9.2.2 <i>THE POWER OF SOCIAL SUPPORT</i>	232
	9.2.2.1 Foster parents	232
	9.2.2.2 Peers and friends	233
	9.2.2.3 Educators	234
	9.2.3 <i>RESILIENCE, MOTIVATION AND ASPIRATIONS</i>	235
	9.2.4 <i>EXTRA-CURRICULAR INVOLVEMENT</i>	236
	9.2.5 <i>A FAILING EDUCATION SYSTEM</i>	237
	9.2.5.1 Special learning needs, grade repetition and progressing youth into a higher standard	238
	9.2.6 <i>KIN vs NON-KIN PLACEMENTS</i>	239
	9.2.7 <i>INSTRUMENTALISATION OF THE ROLE OF THE SOCIAL WORKER</i>	241
9.3	RECOMMENDATIONS	244
	9.3.1 <i>ADDRESSING SYSTEMIC INEQUALITIES AND POVERTY</i>	244
	9.3.2 <i>RE-EVALUATE THE QUINTILE SYSTEM</i>	245
	9.3.3 <i>IMPLEMENT EARLY SCREENING AND INTERVENTION PROGRAMMES FOR STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES</i>	245
	9.3.4 <i>RECOGNISING THE "PARTNERSHIP" WITH THE DCPOs/NGOs AND REVISITING NEOLIBERALISM</i>	246
	9.3.5 <i>IMPROVED SCREENING, TRAINING AND SUPPORT FOR KINSHIP FOSTER PARENTS</i>	247
	9.3.6 <i>ENHANCED SUPPORT FOR FOSTER YOUTH</i>	247
	9.3.7 <i>ACADEMIC SUPPORT FOR FOSTER YOUTH</i>	248
	9.3.8 <i>ENHANCED SUPPORT FOR FOSTER PARENTS</i>	249
	9.3.9 <i>RECLAIMING THE SOCIAL WORK PROFESSION</i>	251
	9.3.10 <i>RECOMMENDED TRAINING FOR SOCIAL WORKERS</i>	251
	9.3.11 <i>RECOMMENDED FUTURE RESEARCH</i>	252
9.4	CONCLUSION	252
REFERENCES		255
APPENDICES		298

SECTION ONE: INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

1.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides an overview of the study's background and rationale, followed by a detailed discussion of the problem statement. It highlights the significance of the study and specifies its location. The chapter then presents the research aim, objectives, questions, and the assumptions of the study. Additionally, it examines the theoretical frameworks that underpin the research, and the chapter concludes with key definitions of terms and an overview of the structure of the thesis.

1.2 BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

In South Africa, various care arrangements exist for orphans and vulnerable children, including kinship care, foster care, cluster foster care, adoption, and institutional care (Mkhwanazi *et al.*, 2018). Foster care, which is a critical component of the country's response to children in vulnerable circumstances (Department of Social Development (DSD), 2010) is issued by order of a children's court or a Section 171 transfer order issued by DSD. In terms of Section 181 of the Children's Act 38/2005 (Children's Act), the primary goal of foster care is "to protect and nurture children by providing a safe, supportive and healthy environment" (Republic of South Africa (RSA), 2005, p.171). Section 7(1) (k) of the said Act prioritises "family living when determining alternative care placements for children in need of care and protection" (RSA, 2005, p. 37). This aligns with Article 20 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and Article 25 (2) of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of Children (ACRWC) (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner, 1989; Organization of African Unity, 1990).

Children enter foster care for various reasons, such as parental substance abuse, poverty, HIV, and incarceration (Beller, 2015; Meinhofer *et al.*, 2020; Morton, 2015a; Palmieri & La Salle, 2016; Smith, 2011). In the South African context, Boning and Ferreira (2013), Perumal (2011), Pretorius and Ross (2010), Schiller (2015) and Van der Westhuizen *et al.* (2012) cite HIV/AIDS, poverty, and unemployment as key contributors to the growing need for foster care placements. The South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) (2024) reported that as of June 2024, 270,320 children were

in foster care, as indicated by the number of foster care grants issued during that period.

Prior to their placement in foster care, many children endure trauma and maltreatment. They frequently come from low-income families facing significant socio-economic challenges, as well as physical and emotional abuse. These early experiences of trauma and separation from their parents can lead to developmental delays and difficulties (Clemens *et al.*, 2017; Mitchell, 2018; Ruff *et al.*, 2019; VanBergeijk & McGowan, 2001). By the time children enter the foster care system (FCS), they have already faced multiple failures and losses, which continue to influence their development (Smith, 2011).

To cope with their childhood trauma and their experiences of foster care, foster children require a special type of caregiving that emphasizes helping them to develop trust, regulate their emotions, build self-esteem, and feel a sense of belonging within the foster home (Schofield & Beek, 2014). Foster parents must demonstrate empathy and consistency to help children feel secure and recognize that they can trust the adults in their lives (Hendry, 2017).

In addition to providing for the daily needs of the children in their care, foster parents are also responsible for ensuring that foster children's educational needs are met, as specified in Regulation 65 of the Children's Act. International studies by Emerson and Lovitt (2003), Skilbred *et al.* (2016) and Strolin-Goltzman *et al.* (2016), as well as South African studies by Perumal (2011) and Schiller (2015) highlight the pivotal role that foster parents play in fostering positive educational outcomes for children in their care. Foster parents in these studies created nurturing environments by including foster children as integral members of the household and demonstrating genuine interest, dedication, and care. This led to a sense of belonging, resulting in emotional stability, essential for academic success. Despite facing challenges such as financial constraints and age-related difficulties, foster parents remained committed to supporting their foster children's educational achievements (Perumal, 2011; Schiller, 2015).

Once a child enters foster care, a social worker plays a pivotal role in supervising the placement, ensuring that the needs of the child are met in a secure and nurturing

family environment. In South Africa, social workers from DSD and Designated Child Protection Organizations (DCPO) have this responsibility (DSD, 2010; Van Niekerk & Matthias, 2019). Social workers are supposed to address the child's needs while supporting foster parents to fulfil their responsibilities effectively.

The FCS in South Africa is severely overburdened and has faced a deepening crisis over the last few years with more orphaned and vulnerable children requiring foster placements. There is a shortage of social workers to manage and support these cases effectively and social workers are overwhelmed by excessive caseloads. Their capacity is further constrained by burdensome administrative responsibilities, which divert focus from delivering essential psychosocial support to families (Boning & Ferreira, 2013; Fortune, 2016; Sibanda & Lombard, 2015). These challenges are exacerbated by neoliberal policies and New Public Management (NPM), which prioritize cost-efficiency and consumerization over comprehensive social welfare. Reduced state funding for Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), has limited the resources available to render social work services (Harris, 2014; Sewpaul, 2013a; Spolander *et al.*, 2016).

Studies reveals that foster children frequently have high educational aspirations and view academic success as a pathway to financial independence and improved life opportunities (Courtney *et al.*, 2004; Gerber & Dicker, 2006; Perumal, 2011; Schiller, 2015; Siyawareva, 2019). Despite these aspirations, international studies reveal that foster youth face challenges in completing secondary education. Factors such as frequent changes in foster placements, which lead to disruptions in school attendance, behavioural difficulties, and limited support from both educators and foster parents, often hinder academic progress. These barriers can ultimately prevent foster youth from completing high school and pursuing higher education (Clemens *et al.*, 2016; Emerson & Lovitt, 2003; Gerber & Dicker, 2006; Johnson *et al.*, 2020; Morton, 2015a; Moyer & Goldberg, 2020; Palmieri & La Salle, 2016; Stone *et al.*, 2006; Zetlin *et al.*, 2004).

In South Africa, similar challenges are evident. Studies by Mlamlala (2008), Mnisi and Botha (2016), Schiller (2015) and Siyawareva (2019) identify poor placement options, peer pressure, inadequate support from foster parents, abuse within foster homes, and difficulties in coping with schoolwork as key factors contributing to foster children

experiencing academic challenges. Additionally, Dhludhlu and Lombard (2017) and Siyawareva (2019) found that insufficient support from the education system exacerbates the poor academic performance of foster youth.

When addressing the education of foster youth, it is important to consider the education system in South Africa and the enduring impact of apartheid on education (Van der Berg, 2005). During apartheid, the system was deliberately structured to protect White interests, with policies and resources favouring White schools (Adams, 2020; McKeever, 2017). Post-apartheid redress efforts introduced a quintile-based funding system that categorizes schools into five quintiles. Quintiles 1–3, located in poorer areas, are non-fee-paying and receive more government support, while Quintiles 4–5 are fee-paying, based on the assumption that families in these areas can afford the costs (Carrim, 2013; Dieltiens & Motala, 2014; Van Dyk & White, 2019). Despite these reforms, significant inequalities persist. 85 % of White students attend fee-paying schools, whereas 98% of students in no-fee schools are Black or Coloured, revealing inequities within the education system (Moses *et al.*, 2017; Spaull, 2019).

Foster children and foster youth offer unique and valuable insights into their educational experiences, including the successes they achieve and the challenges they face. Listening to their voices is critical to understanding and supporting their academic achievements (Clemens *et al.*, 2017; Perumal, 2011; Schroeter *et al.*, 2015). This aligns with Section 10 of the Children's Act and the CRC, which emphasizes the importance of involving children in decisions that impact their lives.

While existing South African studies has revealed that foster children face barriers in achieving academic success (Mlamla, 2008; Siyawareva, 2019), there has been less focus on the experiences of those who have succeeded despite these challenges. Listening to the voices of foster youth who successfully progressed to tertiary education was therefore crucial, as it was anticipated that their experiences will provide insights into the factors that contributed to their educational success and can help inform strategies to improve educational outcomes for all foster youth. The roles of foster parents and social workers also warrant further exploration, as they provide stability and support to foster youth. This study aimed to address these issues by exploring the factors that contribute to the successful educational outcomes for youth currently or previously in foster care. By examining both the positive factors and the

barriers, including the multi-dimensional roles of foster parents and social workers, this research sought to provide a holistic understanding of the pathways to academic success for foster youth.

1.3 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Education is essential for all children, serving as a foundation for personal and professional growth. For foster youth, it is particularly critical, providing a pathway to financial stability and supporting their transition to an independent adult life (Courtney *et al.*, 2004; Gerber & Dicker, 2006; Siyawareva, 2019; Skilbred *et al.*, 2016). However, research reveals that children in foster care often encounter challenges that create barriers to academic success (Clemens *et al.*, 2016; Johnson *et al.*, 2020; Morton, 2015a; Moyer & Goldberg, 2020; Palmieri & La Salle, 2016; Zetlin *et al.*, 2004).

There are limited studies in South Africa focusing specifically on the educational outcomes of foster children. Studies conducted by Mlamla (2008), Mohamed (2012) and Siyawareva (2019) are briefly discussed below.

Mlamla (2008) conducted a qualitative study in Soweto with ten foster youth, their foster parents and six Grade 10 and 11 educators to explore the factors contributing to foster children not completing high school. The study revealed several key factors leading to school dropout, including difficulties in coping with lessons, undiagnosed or unsupported learning disabilities, and a lack of support from foster parents. Mlamla (2008) acknowledged that the study fell short in addressing specific strategies to keep foster children in school. The study recommended further in-depth research to gain a deeper understanding of factors that contribute to foster children not completing high school.

Mohamed (2012) conducted a quantitative study to examine school attainment among foster children using data from the Cape Area Panel Study (CAPS). The cross-sectional analysis revealed that foster children achieved lower grade levels compared to children living with both biological parents. Additionally, the study found that double orphans progressed more slowly and lagged behind by more than a full grade compared to groups of biological children.

Siyawareva (2019) carried out a qualitative study with fourteen foster youth in Cape Town focusing on the educational attainment of youth who aged out of foster care at 18 years. The study revealed that foster youth strongly associated their personal life and career goals with educational attainment. While many acknowledged the supportive role of their foster parents in helping them pursue their educational goals, others reported a lack of encouragement from their caregivers. Financial constraints were identified as a significant barrier. Siyawareva (2019) recommended expanding the research to include a larger sample of foster youth to gain deeper insights into their experiences and challenges in achieving educational goals.

These studies contributed to the understanding of the educational attainment of foster children and youth. However, they did not incorporate the perspectives of foster youth who have successfully completed matric and are pursuing tertiary education. Understanding these experiences is essential for developing targeted interventions and policies to improve educational outcomes for all foster youth. Additionally, these studies excluded social workers and did not focus on the KwaZulu-Natal region. Including the perspectives of foster youth who have achieved educational success was crucial to identifying the factors that contributed to their accomplishments. Equally important was understanding the social workers' roles and their experiences in supporting foster youth's educational progress, an area that has not been explored. This study addressed these gaps by encompassing the perspectives of various stakeholders, including foster youth who have dropped out of school, those who progressed to tertiary institutions, foster parents, and social workers. Furthermore, secondary data analysis was conducted using the case files of foster youth.

The study compared foster youth who did not complete school with those who progressed to tertiary education. Using a comparative, collective case study design and triangulating data from multiple sources and methods, it generates new knowledge by providing comparative insights into the similarities and differences in their educational journeys. By drawing on the perspectives of foster youth, foster parents, and social workers, the study offers a holistic understanding of the systemic, relational, and educational factors that either support or hinder achievement. It fills an important gap in child protection research by highlighting how welfare systems, school environments, and caregiving relationships interact to shape educational outcomes

and concludes with policy and practice recommendations and targeted interventions to strengthen systemic support and improve the educational success of foster youth, particularly in the South African context.

1.4 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Several authors state that education is a fundamental right and an indicator of the wellbeing of society (Hendricks & Thengela, 2020; Pretorius, 2020; Roby *et al.*, 2016). Du Plessis (2019) emphasizes that education is an international must and a human right. According to Hendricks and Thengela (2020), education is linked to economic, social and human development and it promotes self-understanding and advances the quality of life. In line with Article 28 of the CRC and Article 11 of the ACRWC; Section 29 (1) (a) and (b) of the South African Constitution states that all persons have the right to basic education. Section 3 (1) of the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 further makes provision for the mandatory attendance of children at school up to the age of 15 or until they reach ninth grade, whichever occurs first, underscoring the government's obligation to ensure that all children, including those in foster care, access education (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner, 1989; Organization of African Unity, 1990; RSA, 1996a; RSA, 1996b).

I have worked in the child protection field for over twenty-nine years. For the last 20 years, I managed the Foster Care Programme at a child protection organisation (CPO). In 2011, I conducted a study with adolescents and their foster grandparents to understand their experiences of living together. The sample for that study included ten adolescents and eight grandparents that were selected from a CPO (Perumal, 2011). One aspect of the research explored the experiences of the adolescents and the foster grandparents related to education. It was evident in the study that the grandparents and their adolescent foster children saw academic success as a pathway to success and financial independence (Perumal, 2011). However, some of the adolescents in said study related that they encountered difficulties pertaining to schooling, an area that was not explored fully in the study.

A review of the literature reveals a number of international studies related to the educational outcomes of children in foster care. However, there are limited South

African studies specifically related to the educational outcomes of children in foster care.

This study is unique from previous studies carried out in South Africa as it aimed to compare foster youth who have passed matric and are at tertiary institutions, and those who did not complete their schooling. This study sought to address a research gap by including those foster youth who have achieved educational success. It was envisaged that these two samples will provide rich and descriptive accounts of their experiences, thereby including a balanced understanding of foster youth's educational outcomes. By identifying the pathways to educational success, it was envisaged that this study can inspire foster youth and show them that positive educational outcomes are possible, despite the challenges they may encounter. It was anticipated that the insights from both these primary samples will contribute to developing interventions that support foster youth, and promote their school retention. In addition, foster parents and social workers were incorporated in the study to understand their experiences in assisting foster youth achieve positive educational outcomes. This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge in relation to the educational outcomes of foster youth and extends the literature base in South Africa as it includes foster youth at tertiary institutions. The educational outcomes of foster youth are analysed within the macro context of the South African education system, and it provides recommendations for systemic changes in both the education and welfare sectors in the country.

Section 176 of the Children's Act makes provisions for children in foster care to remain in foster care until they are 21 years of age. This is to enable them to complete their schooling and attend further training institutions. Foster children are therefore eligible to collect a foster care grant until they are 21 years of age, provided they are still in school or at a tertiary institution (RSA, 2005). The Department of Education (DOE) provides for school fee exemption for children in foster care (RSA, 2006), and through the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), children from poorer households can obtain a tertiary education (NSFAS, 2023). While these measures are in place, this study provides further policy recommendations and advocacy strategies concerning foster children.

1.5 LOCATION OF THE STUDY

The study was conducted in Pietermaritzburg, located in the uMgungundlovu District of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. KwaZulu-Natal is the country's second-largest province, with an estimated population of 12.39 million (Moultrie & Dorrington, 2024). The uMgungundlovu District, which includes Pietermaritzburg, has a population of approximately 1.24 million, while Pietermaritzburg itself is home to 553,162 people (Moultrie & Dorrington, 2024; Pietermaritzburg, South Africa Population, 2024).

Pietermaritzburg is characterized by a mix of well-developed suburbs and under-resourced, underdeveloped communities. The under-resourced communities face social challenges, including poverty, unemployment, high rates of HIV/AIDS, and substance abuse. These issues have contributed to more children being placed in foster care (Perumal, 2011), a trend that also aligns with my experience working in the child protection field in this region. The uMgungundlovu District has also been identified as a hotspot for HIV in KwaZulu-Natal, recording the highest incidence of HIV cases in the province (Ndlovu, 2024).

KwaZulu-Natal has the second-highest child population in South Africa and the largest number of orphans, with 15% of children having lost one or both parents (Hall, 2024b). The province faces widespread income poverty, with 3.42 million children living in poverty, the highest figure nationwide and 1.6 million children residing in households with no employed adult (Hall, 2024a). Furthermore, KwaZulu-Natal has the greatest number of beneficiaries receiving the child support grant in the country, with 3,008,532 children benefitting from the child support grant, and the second-highest number of foster care grant recipients, with 46 625 children in foster care (SASSA, 2024).

Participants for this study were recruited from four CPOs based in Pietermaritzburg, located in the uMgungundlovu District of KwaZulu-Natal. This research was the first study in KwaZulu-Natal, focusing specifically on understanding the educational outcomes of foster youth. Therefore this study included a diverse group of participants, including foster youth who had advanced to tertiary education, those who had dropped out of school, as well as their foster parents and social workers.

1.6 AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The aim of the study was to understand the factors that contribute to the successful educational outcomes of youth who are in or have been in foster care.

The specific objectives were to:

1. Compare the life experiences of youth in foster care with successful educational outcomes with those youth who have exited the FCS and have not attained such success.
2. Discern the factors that contribute to the attainment of positive educational outcomes for foster youth and those factors that impede successful outcomes.
3. Understand the role of foster parents in the attainment of educational outcomes for youth who are in or have been in foster care.
4. Understand the role of social workers in the attainment of educational outcomes for youth who are in or have been in foster care.

1.7 QUESTIONS TO BE ANSWERED IN THE RESEARCH

1. What are the life experiences of youth in foster care with successful educational outcomes and those youth who were in foster care who have not attained such success?
2. What factors contribute to the attainment of positive educational outcomes for foster youth and what factors impede successful outcomes?
3. What are the roles of foster parents in the attainment of educational outcomes of youth who are in or have been in foster care?
4. What are the roles of social workers in the attainment of educational outcomes of youth who are in or have been in foster care?

1.8 UNDERLYING ASSUMPTIONS OF THE STUDY

1. Foster youth present with unresolved pre – placement trauma which contributes to negative educational outcomes.
2. The possibility of trauma experienced by some foster youth during the foster placement impacts their educational outcomes.

3. Foster youth who have had multiple foster placements would experience more negative educational outcomes in comparison to those with stable foster placements.
4. The foster home environment might not be conducive to successful educational outcomes.
5. The school environment and educators are not supportive of foster children.
6. The personal attributes of social workers, and the demands of the workplace in the face of limited resources influence the educational outcomes of children and youth in foster care.

1.9 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

This study is underpinned by the capability approach and critical theory, as these frameworks share key commonalities that enhance the depth and value of the research. Both are grounded in ethical principles and aim to foster positive change at both individual and societal levels. They emphasize the pursuit of a good life, democracy, and the critique of existing social structures to create a more equitable world. While the capability approach and critical theory align in their overarching goals, they differ in their conceptual frameworks and vocabulary, offering complementary perspectives. Integrating these theories allows for a nuanced understanding of the factors influencing educational outcomes for youth in or formerly in foster care (Zheng & Stahl, 2011).

1.9.1 CAPABILITY APPROACH

The capability approach was initially proposed by Amartya Sen and was concerned with evaluating a person's ability to achieve various functionings as part of living (Sen, 1993).

Sen (1993) identified the following concepts of the capability approach:

✓ **Functionings, capabilities and values**

Functionings refer to the various things that individuals engage in to lead a fulfilling life. The quality of life is evaluated based on a person's capability to achieve these functionings. Some functionings are fundamental, such as access to food and healthcare, while others pertain to personal and social dimensions, such as self-

respect or social integration. The significance of specific functionings varies among individuals, as they assign unique meanings and prioritize them based on personal circumstances and values. This process shapes the importance or value attached to each functioning.

✓ **Value-objects and evaluative spaces**

In an evaluative process, it is crucial to address two questions. *What are the objects of value and how valuable are these objects?* The Capability Approach focuses on identifying these objects of value and sees the evaluative space through the lens of functionings and capabilities.

✓ **Capability and freedom**

The freedom to lead various types of lives is represented by an individual's capability set. However, a person's capabilities are influenced by their personal characteristics and the social arrangements within which they live. Sen acknowledges the complexities and concerns surrounding the concept of freedom as it applies to individual circumstances.

✓ **Well-being**

A person's well-being refers to the overall "wellness of their state of being." The functionings that contribute to well-being can range from basic necessities, such as being adequately nourished and having mobility, to more complex aspects, such as experiencing happiness and achieving self-respect.

Sen (1999) further distinguished between well-being freedom, the ability to achieve personal states of flourishing and agency freedom, the capacity to pursue goals and values beyond oneself. This distinction means that human freedom is not only about achieving personal wellbeing, but also about having the ability to act according to one's values and aspirations. He also emphasised that an individual's capabilities are shaped by social, political and institutional contexts, meaning that freedom is not simply an individual matter but is influenced by the surrounding structures and opportunities in society. This means that the opportunities available to foster youth are not determined solely by personal motivation or ability, but are influenced by the structures, policies, and relationships within the child protection and education systems.

Alkire and Deneulin (2009) contribute deeper insight on the key terms in the capability approach:

- ✓ **Functionings:** Valuable activities and states that contributes to an individual's well-being and may include being healthy, well-nourished, feeling safe, receiving an education, or engaging in meaningful actions such as visiting a loved one.
- ✓ **Capability:** The freedom to pursue and enjoy various functionings, along with the ability to achieve those functionings that individuals deem valuable.
- ✓ **Agency:** The ability to pursue the goals that one values and has reason to value.

According to Alkire and Deneulin (2009), the capability approach is incomplete because it relies on individuals' agency and their involvement in different contexts to determine which capabilities should be prioritized. Since the approach does not specify which capabilities are inherently important, it leaves room for interpretation, which could result in the omission of crucial capabilities or allow those in power to select capabilities that align with their own interests. To address this, Martha Nussbaum, a leading figure in the human capability approach, proposed a list of ten core human capabilities. She argues that what is considered valuable and relevant may be shaped by inequality and discrimination, and that a more equitable approach is needed to ensure equal freedom for all.

Nussbaum (2011) provides a list of ten central capabilities that she suggests that all citizens should have:

- ✓ **Life** – The ability to live a full human lifespan, of typical length.
- ✓ **Bodily health** – The ability to have good health, adequate nutrition and shelter.
- ✓ **Bodily integrity** – The ability to move freely without fear of violence and assault.
- ✓ **Senses, imagination and thought** – The ability to use the senses, think, reason, and have access to adequate education.
- ✓ **Emotions** – The ability to form attachments, and show love and care in a safe world without fear and anxiety.
- ✓ **Practical reason** – The ability to critically reflect and plan one's life.

- ✓ **Affiliation** – The ability to live with and towards others, show concern for others, without discrimination.
- ✓ **Other species** – The ability to show concern for animal, plants and nature.
- ✓ **Play** – The ability to engage in laughter, play and enjoy leisure activities.
- ✓ **Control over one's environment** – The ability to engage in political decisions and hold property rights.

Nussbaum (2011) emphasizes that capabilities belong primarily to individuals. The goal is to enhance the capabilities of each person, rather than using some individuals as a means to enhance the capabilities of others. As such, every person is entitled to equal respect and consideration.

Walker and Unterhalter (2007) point out that when applying the capability approach to education, it is important to distinguish between capabilities and functionings. Functionings refer to the achieved outcomes of an individual, such as the ability to read, while capabilities represent the potential to achieve those functionings, such as access to books and supportive learning environments. The difference lies between the opportunity to achieve and the actual achievement, or between potential and outcome. This approach suggests that we should not merely evaluate functionings but also assess the opportunities available to each student to choose and achieve what they value. This is crucial because providing opportunities for education and fostering educational capabilities enhances human freedom. Unterhalter (2009) notes that individuals' educational aspirations may be shaped by their circumstances, with those from lower-income families often aspiring only to complete primary education due to their limited resources.

DeCesare (2014) emphasizes that when applying the capability approach to education, it is essential to examine how educational policies and practices enable the actual achievement of functionings and capabilities. This is especially relevant in South Africa, where the legacy of apartheid continues to impact education. DeCesare (2014) warns that simply equalizing resources for children does not guarantee equity in education. It is crucial to consider the social and personal circumstances that influence how individual children can convert available resources into actual functionings. Kelly (2012) concurs that applying the capability approach to education

prompts a critical examination of educational policies to determine whether they truly benefit children and enhance their opportunities for growth and development.

Several studies have applied the capability approach to education. Galliot and Graham (2014) conducted a study in Australia to explore students' capabilities in making career choices. They concluded that a student's inability to make informed career decisions is not solely an individual issue. They argue that policies aimed at addressing youth unemployment by raising aspirations and career awareness fail to tackle the underlying factors that affect career choice capabilities. They emphasize the significance of examining the interaction between individual students and the quality of education they receive.

Algraini (2019) conducted a study in Saudi Arabia that examined the challenges learners face in becoming lifelong learners and fully developed thinkers. The study found that the implementation of education policies limits core human capabilities and does little to support holistic personal development. Schools tend to focus on moving students through the system by adhering to a rigid curriculum, rather than fostering intellectual growth. This approach leads students to view education primarily as a means to financial success. The study highlights the need to prioritize the development of well-rounded citizens and encourage the cultivation of critical capabilities in future generations.

Hart and Brando (2018) applied the capability approach to study how children's agency, well-being, and participation rights can be developed and supported in educational settings. They concluded that it is crucial to work with both children and their caregivers to establish a shared understanding of capabilities, considering the children's maturity and competence to function effectively. Studies by Hannon *et al.* (2017) and Keung and Ho (2020) applied the capability approach to research involving disadvantaged students. Their findings reveal that, despite their challenging circumstances, these students possess the capabilities to aspire to higher education. These studies highlight the value of the capability approach in understanding factors influencing education.

The capability approach underscores the importance of both the opportunities available to students and their actual achievements. Within the South African context,

where historical inequalities exist and continue to affect education, this perspective is relevant for foster youth who face additional challenges such as unstable home environments and limited access to resources. Therefore, in this study, this approach will offer deeper insights into the factors shaping the educational outcomes of youth currently or formerly in foster care.

1.9.2 CRITICAL THEORY

Critical theory originated in the 1920's in Germany with the Frankfurt School of Social Research, with Horkheimer and Habermas being instrumental critical theorists. (Cimino, 2015; Payne, 2014). According to Payne (2014), critical theorists argue that social problems stem from the oppression of subordinate groups by dominant groups. Critical theory, therefore, emphasizes structural explanations for these issues, with a particular focus on inequality and oppression. Cimino (2015) asserts that critical theory engages with issues of social justice, diversity, and the dynamics of oppression.

Central to critical theory is critical awareness. Cimino (2015) explains that critical theory is grounded in the belief that, as rational beings, we have the capacity to question and critique the taken-for-granted assumptions about society. It encourages us to recognize and challenge oppressive forces, motivating collective efforts to transform society. Freire (1970) refers to the concept of "conscientization," which involves helping people understand and critique the social structures that oppress them. Conscientization represents the development of critical awareness, critical awakening and critical understanding that would lead to critical action (Freire, 1973).

Fook and Gardner (2007) and Cimino (2015) highlight the importance of communication in developing critical consciousness, as it fosters the creation of new shared understandings. Through dialogue, individuals are encouraged to question their life experiences and uncover how power dynamics shape their perceptions of reality. Payne (2014) builds on this by asserting that for meaningful dialogue to occur, relationships must be equal, allowing for the open and free exchange of views on social issues. According to Payne (2014) and Cimino (2015), critical theorists emphasize the importance of praxis, which involves the integration of theory and practice. This approach builds on individuals' experiences of oppression and inequality

to generate knowledge about how society functions, motivating people to engage in efforts for social transformation.

Critical theorists further recognize that domination is both personally experienced and structurally imposed. As a result, individuals may contribute to their own domination by failing to believe in their ability to change their position within the social structure. Therefore, meaningful change must occur on both a personal and collective level. For transformation to take place, individuals need to understand how personal change can lead to broader societal shifts (Fook & Gardner, 2007; Fook, 2015). In South Africa, the legacy of apartheid and socio-economic inequalities limit opportunities and access to resources, while individuals may internalize this and doubt their ability to succeed.

According to Cimino (2015), critical theory has many strengths that make it valuable in social work practice. It upholds the principle of social justice and can be applied at both the micro and macro levels. This means it is relevant not only in one-on-one interactions but also in broader activities like community organizing and advocacy. Critical theory highlights the impact of oppression on individuals' lives and empowers them to contribute to meaningful change. It encourages questioning taken-for-granted assumptions about knowledge and the world, offering a lens through which to challenge the status quo. Moreover, it provides a framework for promoting change and freedom for marginalized groups. For social workers, critical theory aligns with the profession's ethical standards, advocating for the fight against social injustice and reinforcing the profession's core values.

Central to critical theory is the concept of intersectionality. Sewpaul (2013c) emphasizes that adopting an intersectional lens allows us to explore the social divisions and power dynamics that shape the lives of people. A central theme of intersectionality is the examination of how power structures based on gender, race, and class impact social opportunities, such as access to education, career advancement, and overall quality of life. In this study, intersectionality provides an essential lens for understanding the educational outcomes of foster youth. Foster care cannot be separated from the country's history of inequality and oppression, where the legacies of apartheid marginalized black families. The reality that in South Africa, the majority of foster children are Black, and that most of their foster parents are Black

women reflects the intersecting forces of race, class and gender in shaping foster care experiences. This perspective allows this study to move beyond individual explanations of educational barriers to show how structural inequalities such as poverty, and gendered caregiving responsibilities impact educational outcomes.

While critical theory is valuable in raising awareness of injustice, Cimino (2015) acknowledges its limitations. One critique is that it places too much emphasis on oppression, which can foster a pessimistic view of the world. Critical theorists argue that one of the primary means of bringing about change is through communication. However, the goal of presenting an “undistorted view” may not always be achievable. Additionally, the theory assumes that people are always rational, but this is not always the case, as individuals sometimes act out of emotion rather than logic. Another limitation is that critical theory can, at times, overlook the need for practical solutions to the problems it identifies.

Critical theory emphasizes structural explanations for social issues, injustice, and oppression, making it particularly relevant to this study. In South Africa, the legacy of apartheid has entrenched systemic inequality, with the education system still bearing the scars of historical inequities (Van der Berg, 2005). Despite efforts to transform the education sector, persistent challenges hinder equitable access and the improvement of educational outcomes for all children (Maarman & Lamont-Mbawuli, 2017; Du Plessis, 2019).

Social workers are critical role-players in supporting foster youth in all aspects of their lives. Critical theory challenges social workers to reflect deeply on their dual responsibilities as both caseworkers and advocates for the children and communities they serve. This is aligned with the Global Social Work Statement of Ethical Principles (IASSW, 2018, p.6) where principles 4.7 and 4.8 read as:

4.7. “Social workers recognize that dominant socio-political and cultural discourses and practices contribute to many taken-for-granted assumptions and entrapments of thinking, which manifest in the normalization and naturalization of a range of prejudices, oppressions, marginalization, exploitation, violence and exclusions.

4.8 Social workers recognize that developing strategies to heighten critical consciousness that challenge and change taken-for-granted assumptions for the people and ourselves whom we engage with, forms the basis of everyday ethical, anti-oppressive practice”.

Ferguson and Lavalette (2006) highlight the importance of defending the social work profession, emphasizing its role in improving lives, challenging stigma and discrimination, and advancing social justice. Similarly, Sewpaul (2013a) advocates for social workers to balance direct interventions with individuals, families, and communities, while addressing structural inequalities. In this study, social workers are included as part of the sample. It is anticipated that they will engage in critical reflections on their roles as practitioners and advocates for the individuals and communities they serve, thereby reclaiming the social work profession. It is only following this reflection that social workers can act to change their current situation (Freire, 1970).

Critical theory provides a valuable framework for understanding the educational outcomes of foster youth in South Africa, by highlighting how apartheid and ongoing structural inequalities disadvantage children in care. It highlights the need to address both personal needs and systemic barriers. For social workers, this means taking responsibility not only for supporting individual children but also for challenging and changing the broader systems that affect their education and wellbeing. In line with the definition of social work as both a helping profession and a practice of social justice, critical theory reinforces that social workers must act as advocates for systemic change as well as providers of direct support.

1.10 DEFINITION OF TERMS

ALTERNATIVE CARE

A child in alternative care is defined as “a child that has either been placed in foster care, in the care of a Child and Youth Care Centre following the order of a Children’s Court; or in temporary safe care” (DSD, 2010, p. 4).

CHILDREN'S ACT (as amended)

The Children's Act, which governs the care and protection of children in South Africa, came into effect on April 1, 2010. It is aligned with international child protection charters and the South African Constitution. Subsequent amendments to the Act have clarified provisions regarding orphaned and abandoned children. Notably, children “who are orphaned or abandoned but already living with a family member are not automatically deemed to need care and protection” (Proudlock *et al.*, 2024, p.29).

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT (DSD)

DSD refers to “the national department responsible for the provision of social development services” (RSA, 2005, p. 24).

DESIGNATED CHILD PROTECTION ORGANISATION (DCPO)

A DCPO is “an organisation designated by the Provincial DSD to perform child protection services” (RSA, 2005, p. 24).

EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

Educational outcomes include school readiness, retention, drop-out, educational achievement and years of schooling completed (Engle & Black, 2008).

FOSTER CARE

According to RSA (2005, p. 26) “the care of a child placed under a children's court order or a Section 171 order in terms of the Children's Act is commonly referred to as foster care”. Several authors such as VanBergeijk and McGowan (2001) critique the term foster care, arguing that it carries negative connotations and emphasizes difference. Gerber and Dicker (2006); Krebs and Pitcoff (2006), and Johnson *et al.* (2020) suggest that the term "foster care" can perpetuate stigma, also implying that a child placed in foster care has done something wrong. Given the legal and popular use of “foster care”, “foster parents” and “foster children” globally and nationally, these concepts are used in this study.

FOSTER CHILD

Refers to “a child who is placed in the care of someone other than their biological parents by order of a Children's Court or a Section 171 order in terms of the Children's Act” (DSD, 2010. p. 5).

FOSTER CARE GRANT (FCG)

Refers to “the social security grant payable to a foster parent who has a child placed in their care by order of the court or a Section 171 order of the Children’s Act” (DSD, 2010. p. 6).

FOSTER PARENT

Refers to “a person who has foster care of a child by order of a Children’s Court or a Section 171 order in terms of the Children’s Act. The foster parent has the status of a caregiver and not as a parent of the foster child” (DSD, 2012, p. 14).

SOCIAL WORKER

Refers to “a person who is registered as a social worker in terms of the Social Services Professions Act, 1978 and is responsible for rendering social work services” (RSA, 2005, p. 31).

YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE

In terms of Section 176 of the Children’s Act, “a person who was placed in alternate care as a child, can remain in alternate care after the age of 18, until the age of 21 to enable them to complete their schooling or attend tertiary institutions” (RSA, 2005, p,168).

1.11 STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

SECTION ONE: INTRODUCTION

Chapter 1 – Introduction to the study

This chapter provides an overview of the study’s background and rationale, followed by a detailed discussion of the problem statement. It highlights the significance of the study and specifies its location. The chapter presents the study's aim, objectives, research questions, and underlying assumptions. It examines the theoretical frameworks that underpin the research, and ends with key definitions of terms and an overview of the thesis structure.

SECTION TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review is discussed across four chapters.

Chapter 2 – Factors contributing to children needing care

In this chapter, the definition and the rights of the child are presented, followed by a discussion on the global context of children. This is followed by a discussion on families in South Africa. The reasons that contribute to children needing care and protection are examined, followed by an overview of welfare services and the role players responsible for the care and protection of children in South Africa. The chapter ends with an analysis of how neoliberalism and NPM as factors impacting social work and children.

Chapter 3 – Placement of children in foster care

This chapter briefly outlines the different types of alternative care, with the focus on foster care. It begins with an outline of the legislative framework for the children's care and protection internationally and in South Africa. Thereafter a brief overview is provided on the global foster care context, followed by an examination of foster care in South Africa.

Chapter 4 – Foster youth and education

This chapter begins with an examination of the South African education system. Thereafter the education of foster youth is analysed, including a discussion of factors that promote or hinder positive educational outcomes. The social worker's role in supporting foster youth achieve positive educational outcomes is also addressed in this chapter.

Chapter 5 – Youth transitioning out of foster care and independent living

This chapter centres on foster youth's experiences as they navigate the transition from care to independence.

SECTION THREE: METHODOLOGY

Chapter 6 – Methodology

This chapter begins with a discussion of the research paradigm and design, followed by a detailed discussion of the sampling strategies, data collection tools, and methods of data analysis. Additionally, the chapter examines the ethical considerations and the trustworthiness of the study, concluding with the study's limitations.

SECTION FOUR: RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

This section presents the research findings related to the study's aim and objectives. The analysis represents the voices of foster youth who transitioned to tertiary education and those who did not complete school, foster parents and social workers, and data obtained from an in-depth analysis of case files. With the use of triangulation, I present the findings collectively across the multiple data sources. These are discussed in relation to literature, the theoretical frameworks that underpin the study and my interpretations and reflections.

Chapter 7 – Demographics of the participants and life experiences of foster youth

Chapter seven presents the demographic information of the participants followed by an analysis and discussion of the experiences of foster youth and their interactions with the social worker.

Chapter 8 – Factors that contribute to or impede the educational outcomes of foster youth

This chapter provides insights into the opportunities and challenges that foster youth encounter in achieving their desired educational outcomes. These include personal factors such as resilience, motivation and aspirations, the role of foster parents, the education system and peer support. The chapter provides a comprehensive understanding of the educational experiences of foster youth and the ways in which their unique circumstances influenced their academic achievements.

Chapter 9 – Conclusions and recommendations

This chapter presents the major conclusions of the study and policy and practice recommendations are made to improve the outcomes for children in alternative care.

SECTION TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review is discussed across four chapters. Chapter two discusses the circumstances of children and factors contributing to them needing care and protection. Chapter three focuses on the placement of children in foster care. Foster youth and their education are discussed in chapter four. Chapter five focuses on the transition and independent living of foster youth. The relevant international charters, South African legislations and policies are discussed throughout the chapters to provide a legislative framework for the care and protection of children.

CHAPTER TWO: FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO CHILDREN NEEDING CARE AND PROTECTION

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter begins with the definition and the rights of the child followed by an exploration of the global context of children. Thereafter, families in South Africa are discussed. The reasons that contribute to children needing care and protection are examined, followed by a discussion on welfare services and the role players responsible for the care and protection of children in South Africa. The chapter concludes with an analysis of how neoliberalism and NPM as factors impact social work and children.

2.2 DEFINITION OF A CHILD

In defining the child, both the CRC and the ACRWC refer to a child as “any human being below the age of 18 years” (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner, 1989, p. 2; Organization of African Unity, 1990, p. 2). As a signatory to the CRC and the ACRWC, the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa and the Children’s Act also define a child as “any person under the age of 18” (RSA, 1996a. p. 12; RSA, 2005, p. 22).

2.3 RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

The international charters make provisions for several rights of children. This includes; “the right to a name and nationality from birth; to family care or parental care, or to appropriate alternative care when removed from the family environment; to basic nutrition, shelter, basic health care and social services and to be protected from maltreatment, neglect, abuse or degradation and exploitative labour practices” (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner, 1989, pp. 1-4; Organization of African Unity, 1990, pp. 2-7).

Children's rights are recognised in Section 28 of the Constitution of South Africa (RSA, 1996a). While the rights of children are enshrined in international instruments and in South African legislation, they are compromised on several levels, resulting in the vulnerability of children. According to the Policy Framework on Orphans and other

Children made vulnerable by HIV and AIDS a vulnerable child is one “whose survival, care, protection or development may be compromised due to a particular condition, situation or circumstance and which prevents the fulfilment of his or her rights” (DSD, 2005, p. 5). Understanding the factors that contribute to such vulnerability is essential as these challenges not only affect children’s immediate well-being but also have long-term consequences for their development.

The discussion below elaborates on the vulnerability of children globally and within the South African context.

2.4 THE GLOBAL CONTEXT OF CHILDREN

Globally, children face several challenges. Africa and Asia present with the largest global challenges regarding the survival, development and protection of children. The global economic crisis of 2008/2009, contributed to an increase in poverty and undernutrition in developing countries (UNICEF, 2009). According to Patel (2009), children were the most impacted by the economic crisis as it resulted in poor health indicators, lower educational attainment, increased child labour and reduced family income. Cockburn *et al’s.* (2010) study in Burkina Faso, Cameroon and Ghana revealed that the global economic crisis spread to developing countries, impacting economic growth and poverty reduction negatively, and children in the most vulnerable circumstances felt the consequences most severely.

A further factor to consider is the humanitarian crises around the world. In 2021, 235 million people needed humanitarian assistance in response to war, disaster, displacement and disease. The COVID 19 pandemic exacerbated the vulnerability of children, with approximately 1,6 billion children losing education (UNICEF, 2021). The plight of children continued into 2022, with millions suffering the consequences of floods, storms and droughts linked to climate change. This resulted in a global nutrition crisis, with 45 million children suffering from wasting worldwide and families being plunged into deeper poverty (UNICEF, 2022). Children continue to be the most vulnerable victims of war and conflict, with more than 450 million currently living in or having fled war zones. Over 336 million children are suffering from food insecurity, 739 million lack access to safe water, and 1.4 billion are deprived of social protection measures that could alleviate child poverty (UNICEF, 2023). In 2015, many countries

committed to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to enhance the lives of people and protect the planet by 2030. However, UNICEF (2023) reports that the world is significantly lagging and is unlikely to achieve two-thirds of the child-related goals at the current pace.

Although progress has been made in advancing the rights of children, they continue to bear the brunt of global factors that impact their wellbeing. This brings to mind this profound statement by Anthony Lake, the Executive Director of UNICEF:

“As we look around the world today, we’re confronted with an uncomfortable but undeniable truth: Millions of children’s lives are blighted, for no other reason than the country, the community, the gender or the circumstances into which they are born. Unless we accelerate the pace of our progress in reaching them, the futures of millions of disadvantaged and vulnerable children – and therefore the future of their societies – will be imperilled” (UNICEF, 2016, vi).

2.5 THE ROLE OF FAMILIES IN CARING FOR CHILDREN

2.5.1 FAMILIES DEFINED

Families are important in providing caring for and shaping the future of children. According to McGoldrick *et al.* (2016) we are born into families which become the foundation of our first experiences of the world, our first relationships, and our first sense of belonging. Families share a history and an implied future. Similarly, in defining the family, Amoateng and Richter (2007, p. 14) state that “families are social groups that are related by blood (kinship), marriage, adoption, or affiliation with close emotional attachment to each other that endure over time and go beyond a particular residence”.

The Revised White Paper on Families in South Africa defines families as “as a societal group that is related by blood (kinship), adoption, foster care or the ties of marriage, civil union, or co-habitation and go beyond a particular residence” (RSA, 2021, p. iv). Hall and Richter (2018, p. 23) refer to the family as a “large, multigenerational network of people who are linked by blood, marriage or ties of co-residence and who share a home, or live in different places across the country, or it could be two parents with two children living together, or separated parents with new partners and their biological

and non-biological children, two fathers with an adopted child, a mother with children and grandchildren or even siblings living together”.

Hepworth *et al.* (2010), contend that diverse family forms add to the rich opportunities that enables individuals to experience a sense of belonging, care and interrelatedness. Irrespective of how families are formed, they have certain responsibilities to meet the health, educational, social and emotional well-being needs of their members. Families meet the physical needs of their members. They are responsible for the primary socialization of children by teaching and reinforcing social norms and rules when necessary. Families also satisfy emotional needs by providing family members with affection, companionship and a sense of belonging. Furthermore, the family performs functions like no other system and is therefore the preferred arrangement for minors (Amoateng & Richter, 2003; Engle & Black, 2008; Hepworth *et al.*, 2010).

Families play a crucial role in providing children with a safe and suitable living environment while addressing their health, emotional, educational, and developmental needs. They are responsible for protecting children from maltreatment, abuse, neglect, discrimination, and exploitation, as well as safeguarding and promoting their rights. Moreover, families support children in making decisions that align with their age, level of maturity, and stage of development (DSD, 2012). The definitions above reveal that families are not static entities; rather they are shaped by cultural norms, legislation and socio-economic conditions. Families also bear the responsibility to meet the physical, emotional, educational and developmental needs of their members. Therefore families can be seen as both protective, yet at the same time as vulnerable, especially where structural inequalities undermine their capacity to fulfil these roles as discussed below.

2.5.2. FAMILIES IN SOUTH AFRICA

According to Budlender and Lund (2011) the nuclear family in South Africa is not the norm. Many households do not consist of two parents and children and many children do not reside with their biological parents. Even if they do live with their parents, fathers play a minor role.

In South Africa, the past policies of the Apartheid government in the shaping and disintegration of families must be noted. Apartheid policies served to protect the minority white population at the expense of the Coloured, Indian and predominantly African populations. The Indian and Coloured communities were subject to the Group Areas Act that relocated them to the urban periphery, disrupting supportive extended family units (Hall & Richter 2018; Mokomane, 2014). However, it was the African population that felt the consequences of the harsh policies of Apartheid. To begin with, was the removal of the African population in vast numbers to the homelands based on their economic usefulness to the white economy, thus splitting up families (Budlender & Lund, 2011; Hall & Richter, 2018; Mokomane, 2014).

Linked to this was the migrant labour system that resulted in men working in the cities and mines, while their families lived in the designated homelands. The men lived in appalling conditions, and in accommodation that was not designed for families. Extra-marital relationships were rife and the men had little involvement in the care of their children (Budlender & Lund, 2011; Hall & Richter, 2018; Mokomane, 2014; Mtshali, 2015). African women were employed as domestic workers and were forced to leave their children in the care of their families as they were not allowed to live on their employment premises with their children (Hall & Richter, 2018). The state, therefore, undermined parental care for children, and passed on childcare to the extended family to care for children in the African population (Seekings & Moore, 2013), a pattern that perpetuates to date (Seepamore, 2018).

A direct consequence of the migrant labour system was the disintegration of family life and the double burden of caregiving and breadwinning falling on the elderly, primarily on women, resulting in female-headed households (Budlender & Lund, 2011; Mokomane, 2014; Mtshali, 2015). According to Hall and Richter (2018) gender inequalities and the reliance on women to care for families stems from the Apartheid policies and continues to to date. Another consequence of apartheid was the number of single-parent families resulting from pregnancies out of marriage and divorce (Amoateng *et al.*, 2004; Bigombe & Khadiagala, 2003). Recent studies by Jacobs (2023) and Erasmus and Raniga (2025) have noted that single-parent families remain prevelant in South Africa, highlighting that historical inequalities continue to shape families and contribute to their vulnerabilities.

Poverty and inequality are consequences of the Apartheid policies, that deterred families from playing their various roles and meeting the needs of families (De Lannoy *et al.*, 2015; Mokomane, 2014). The majority of the African population were treated unfairly and were excluded from access to education, employment, business opportunities, housing and land. Expenditure for services was differentiated according to race, with the African population receiving the least funding for education, health care and housing (De Lannoy *et al.*, 2015; Hall & Richter, 2018).

Further factors that impacted child and family well-being are the high rates of poverty and HIV/AIDS (Du Plessis & Conley, 2007; Goldblatt, 2014; Patel & Ross, 2022) as discussed below.

2.6 THE IMPACT OF POVERTY ON CHILDREN AND FAMILIES IN SOUTH AFRICA

Du Plessis and Conley (2007, p. 049), define poverty as “the inability of individuals, household or entire communities to command sufficient resources to satisfy a socially acceptable minimum standard of living”. Chikadzi and Pretorius (2011) differentiate between case poverty and mass poverty. Case poverty refers to when an individual or family suffers poverty in a predominantly affluent society and action can be taken to address this by the community, church or welfare services. On the other hand, mass poverty occurs when a whole community is visibly poor, with a few families who enjoy wealth and privileges. According to De Lannoy *et al.* (2015) poverty is not only experienced in relation to financial deprivation, but also access to basic services such as education, health care, clean water and housing to name a few. Engle and Black (2008) point out that the definition of poverty is a subject of ongoing debate, extending beyond mere economic constraints. Poverty can also be understood as a lack of capabilities, including social belonging, cultural identity, respect, dignity, access to information, and education. This aligns with Sen’s (1999) capability approach, which views poverty not only as low income, but as a deprivation of the freedoms required to lead a life of value.

Mokomane (2014) contends that the levels of poverty in South Africa still reflects the consequences of the apartheid regime. Additionally, Makiwane and Berry (2013) state that poverty and inequality continue to undermine the family as an institution. The immediate cause of poverty is the low levels of earned income and unemployment.

Poverty is prevalent in the former homeland regions, informal settlements and townships. Women bear the worst brunt of poverty as they remain in the rural communities to take care of family members, and spend less time in paid employment, thus increasing their economic vulnerabilities.

Poverty also increases the stress that parents experience when they are trying to protect and provide for their children. Parents may come across as distant and harsh, impacting the sense of belonging for children and parenting. Additionally, because they are living in poverty, parents may have limited time and access to resources to support their children's learning. Thus, poverty reduces the ability to parent effectively (Ward *et al.*, 2015). Similarly, a report by UNICEF (2021) reflects that poverty can interfere with a caregiver's capacity to provide positive parenting, which can hinder a child's brain development and mental health, with long-term consequences for academic and social outcomes. Furthermore, the daily stresses of poverty have been linked to maternal depression that can hinder the interaction between the mother and her new-born. Poverty has also been linked to punishing and neglectful parenting which can contribute to anxiety and depression in children.

According to Hall (2022a), child poverty remains very high in South Africa. As at 2020, 51 % of children in the country were poor, 39% of children falling below the food poverty line. Additionally, there are racial disparities in income poverty, with 68 % of African children and 47% of Coloured living in poor households in 2020, and 3% of White children living below the poverty line. The percentage of poor children in South Africa rose to 53% in 2022, despite a slight reduction in the number of children living below the food poverty line, which dropped to 38%. The proportion of African and Coloured children living in poor households increased to 75% and 49%, respectively (Hall, 2024a). This reflects not only persistent inequality, but also a widening gap of resources available to children from different racial and socio-economic backgrounds.

Poverty constrains children's ability to achieve key developmental milestones. Studies consistently link economic deprivation to poor educational outcomes, behavioural challenges and adverse health outcomes. Additionally, children living in poverty often lack access to basic necessities, including food, housing, and healthcare (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Duncan *et al.*, 2014; Du Plessis & Conley, 2007; Mbarathi *et al.*,

2016; Yoshikawa *et al.*, 2012). Therefore, poverty in South Africa cannot be addressed as an isolated variable, as it is a product of historical inequalities and a driving force that shapes family dynamics, parenting capacity and children's development.

Moreover, the HIV epidemic adds further strain to South African families as is discussed below.

2.7 THE IMPACT OF HIV/AIDS ON CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

HIV remains one of South Africa's most significant health challenges impacting children and families (Bridgman & Van Fintel, 2022; Maqoko & Dreyer, 2007; Murtin & Marzo, 2013; Tamasane & Head, 2010). Poverty complicated the HIV pandemic and deepened the effects of HIV, and in turn HIV aggravated the circumstances of those already existing in poverty and disrupted families (Shung-King & Roux, 2005). A study by Murtin and Marzo (2013), in the Free State found that HIV/AIDS caused a massive increase in chronic poverty among the rural population, and resulted in decreased household income. The interplay between HIV and poverty is particularly significant as poverty increases vulnerability to infection through limited access to health care, while HIV can exacerbate economic hardship by reducing earning capacity and increased medical expenses.

Recent statistics from UNAIDS (2024) indicate that approximately 39.9 million people globally were living with HIV as at 2023, with 20.8 million residing in Eastern and Southern Africa. In South Africa alone, approximately 7.7 million adults and children were living with HIV as at 2023 (UNAIDS, 2023). The global number of orphans increased significantly due to HIV/AIDS. UNICEF (2005) reported 15 million children were orphaned by HIV/AIDS worldwide in 2005. As at 2022, an estimated 13.9 million children worldwide had lost one or both parents to HIV, reflecting a decline over the years (USAID, 2024). In South Africa, according to the General Household Survey in 2005, there were 3,4 million orphans, who had lost their mother, father or both their parents (Meintjes, *et al.*, 2006). The number of orphans had increased by over a million for the period 2002 – 2009. Thereafter, a reduction in the number of orphans in South Africa was noted, attributed to more people accessing anti-retroviral treatment. As at 2020, there were 2,9 million orphans in South Africa (Hall, 2022b), with this number further decreasing to 2,8 million in 2022 (Hall, 2024b).

Families in South Africa have long been characterised as adaptive and resilient in the face of colonialism, apartheid, political turmoil and urbanisation (Smit, 2007). This historical adaptability positioned them as the primary support for vulnerable children (Foster, 2004). However, the HIV/AIDS pandemic intensified the pressures on already strained households. Families faced economic challenges as prolonged illnesses reduced earning capacities and medical expenses escalated. Household structures were further impacted as spouses deserted their families when they learnt that their partners were infected with HIV and the high mortality rate resulted in only one parent to care for children (Foster, 2004; Molato, *et al.*, 2024; Smit, 2007; Sherr *et al.*, 2017; Van Blerk & Ansell, 2007).

Traditionally, grandparents in African families have played a central role in the care of and socialisation of their grandchildren, even before the HIV pandemic. With the HIV pandemic, grandparents had to assume full responsibility for raising their grandchildren, following the deaths of their adult children (Shisana & Louw, 2006; Tamasane & Head, 2010; Van Blerk & Ansell, 2007). While this highlights the resilience of the grandparents, it also exposes their vulnerabilities as they are elderly, dealing with their own health complications and face economic challenges, at the same time remaining a safety net for orphaned children (Breckenridge *et al.*, 2019; Molato, *et al.*, 2024; Smit, 2007).

Despite these challenges, studies have shown the resilience and commitment of grandmothers in these contexts, for example Alpaslan and Mabutho (2005) found that grandmothers in Botswana are committed to the care of their grandchildren while Schatz's (2007) research in rural Agincourt revealed the vital economic role that elderly women assume as sole financial providers. Similarly, Perumal (2011), in her study with grandmothers and their adolescent foster children in KwaZulu-Natal, found that although grandmothers faced struggles, they were dedicated to caring for their grandchildren. These findings illustrate both the resilience of families and the responsibility of caregiving, which falls disproportionately on elderly women.

Families in South Africa have evolved significantly over the years, due to globalisation, modernisation, and the HIV/AIDS pandemic (Makiwane & Berry, 2013). That said, African families, in keeping with their cultural beliefs about family life and kin

relationships continue to live in extended families (Amoateng & Richter, 2003). The HIV pandemic, however, placed unprecedented strain on the extended family as they had the dual responsibility to care for sick family members and orphaned children, stretching already limited financial resources (Breckenridge *et al.*, 2019; Freeman & Nkomo, 2006; Tamasane & Head, 2010; Van Blerk & Ansell, 2007). While the extended family has always been a safety net, Foster (2004) argues that this is being weakened due to the rising number of orphans, and a decline in the availability of primary caregivers such as uncles and aunts. Furthermore, Freeman and Nkomo (2006) assert that there is some reluctance amongst relatives and others to take in children who are HIV positive, due to possible fear of contagion, stigma and having to possibly deal with their ongoing illness, suffering and death.

The community itself responded to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Foster (2004) cites a study conducted in East and Southern Africa, that highlights the extent of support that families received from religious groups, women's groups and community-based organisations that enabled them to care for orphans. This is in keeping with the concept of *Ubuntu* which sees the community as "providing the relational context and support through which individuals develop and live" (Whitworth & Wilkinson, 2013, p.125). *Ubuntu* emphasises values such as "sharing, compassion, understanding, reciprocity, kindness, solidarity and sensitivity" (Whitworth & Wilkinson, 2013, p.125). *Ubuntu* means that a "child belongs to the community and as such, can be looked after by any parent or adult in the community, in the absence of that child's biological parents" (Radebe & Phooko, 2017, p. 240). However, Maqoko and Dreyer (2007) argue that *Ubuntu* is failing in the light of the many child-headed households following the AIDS pandemic.

Children in child-headed households are forced to assume the dual roles of nursing their parents and taking care of their younger siblings (Foster, 2004; Maqoko & Dreyer, 2007; Ngconjana *et al.*, 2017; Shisana & Louw, 2006; Smit, 2007; Tshivhase *et al.*, 2025). Children are forced to leave school, and in some instances try to generate income, through illegal activities such as petty theft and crime (Foster, 2004; Maqoko & Dreyer, 2007; Shisana & Louw, 2006; Smit, 2007). The pandemic has also contributed to the increase in the number of children residing on the streets (Foster, 2004; Van Blerk & Ansell, 2007). Children's access to essential needs such as food,

health and schooling are compromised and they sometimes lose their inheritance when their parents die. Without their parents to protect them, affected children are at risk of abuse and infection as they are forced into sexual exploitation for food, protection and shelter (Esau, 2025; Ngconjana *et al.*, 2017; Nziyane & Alpaslan, 2012; Tshivhase *et al.*, 2025; Van Blerk & Ansell, 2007). This illustrates how the pandemic deepened children's vulnerability, leaving their immediate survival needs unmet while simultaneously undermining their long-term capabilities for education, safety, and overall development.

2.7.1 SOUTH AFRICAN GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE TO SUPPORTING FAMILIES

One response to addressing the severe impact of HIV on children in South Africa is the ISIBINDI programme, which is a community-based programme for the care of orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) developed by the National Association for Care Workers (NACCW), funded by PEPFAR and the DSD. The ISIBINDI programme aims primarily to establish safe and supportive communities and to ensure that the basic needs of OVCs are met. Child and youth care workers are trained to offer support to children and families. Additionally, the ISIBINDI programme focuses on income generation and skills development programmes in communities (Mkhwanazi *et al.*, 2018; Visser *et al.*, 2015). The programme's focus extends beyond the immediate provision of basic needs to establishing supportive communities, enhancing problem-solving skills, and promoting psychosocial well-being with the assistance of trained child and youth care workers. Studies suggest that children participating in ISIBINDI report improved self-esteem, family support, and reduced HIV-risk behaviours compared to non-participants, revealing the programme's role in strengthening families and communities to keep children safe. (Mkhwanazi *et al.*, 2018; Visser *et al.*, 2015).

At a policy level, the South African government recognised that the far-reaching consequences of HIV/AIDS need a collaborative approach between the government, community, businesses and civil society and developed a Policy Framework on OVC. Central to this framework is the recognition of families as primary caregivers and the strategic objective of enhancing their capacity to provide care and protection. This includes strengthening the economic capacity of families through social security safety

nets and food security (DSD, 2005). Research supports the effectiveness of such measures; for instance, Booysen (2004) demonstrated that social grants mitigated the economic pressures associated with HIV/AIDS in the Free State, while Freeman and Nkomo (2006) observed that families were more willing to care for orphans when such financial support was available.

South Africa's constitutional and legal framework underpins these efforts by the government. Section 27(1) of the Constitution guarantees access to social security for those unable to support themselves and their dependents (RSA, 1996a), while the Social Assistance Act 13 of 2004, governs the provision of social security in the country. This aligns with international obligations, including Article 26 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which recognises the state's duty to ensure social security for children (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner, 1989). However, historical inequalities continue to shape the provision and accessibility of social support. During apartheid, social assistance was racially skewed, with black children, who constituted the majority, receiving only a fraction of available resources, reflecting systemic exclusion and structural disadvantage (Holscher et al., 2009; Lund et al., 2009; Whitworth & Wilkinson, 2013).

Post-apartheid reforms saw the establishment of the Lund Commission to explore monetary assistance for children and families. This resulted in the Child Support Grant (CSG) of R100 being made payable to children under seven, following a means test for the caregiver (Whitworth & Wilkinson, 2013). In 2012, the eligibility for the CSG was extended to 18 years (McEwen & Woolard, 2012). The current amount for the CSG is R 560 per month. The grant was made payable to the primary caregiver as colonialism, apartheid and HIV impacted South African family structures in ways that in many instances the primary caregiver is not the biological mother (Hall, 2022b; Lund et al., 2009). According to Hall (2024b), less than 30% of African children live with both their parents, while over 80% of Indian and White children live with their parents. Goldblatt (2014) highlighted the negative discourse related to the CSG, suggesting that recipients fall pregnant merely to access the grant, and misuse the grant for their own benefit, rather than to support their children. Ngubane and Maharaj (2018) conducted research in a rural community in KwaZulu-Natal to investigate the relationship between the CSG and childbearing among young women. Contrary to the

arguments presented by some commentators, the women in the study denied having children solely to obtain the child support grant and stated that the grant was minimal and did not cover the cost of raising a child.

The CSG was South Africa's flagship poverty reduction programme and aimed to support poor households with food security (Booyesen, 2004; Patel *et al.*, 2017). However, while this programme has made notable strides in meeting children's basic needs, many still face economic hardship, experience hunger and live in inadequate conditions (Patel *et al.*, 2017). Patel *et al.* (2017) argue for integrated approaches combining both economic and social interventions to break the cycle of poverty and reduce inequality.

One approach to supporting to families and children affected by HIV is placing children in foster care, enabling families to access the FCG. The FCG differs from the CSG in that it was not means tested, but it requires the intervention of the social worker and a court order (Foster, 2004; Meintjes *et al.*, 2005). The CSG is part of the government's poverty alleviation response, while the FCG was introduced much earlier as part of the country's child protection system (CPS), and made available to children who were removed from their family environment due to abuse or neglect. The FCG was also almost three times more than the CSG (Hall & Proudlock, 2011). In 2002, the former Minister of Social Development, Zola Skweyiya, encouraged family members to foster orphaned children (Hall *et al.*, 2016). This gave rise to concern as the FCS was designed for children who were abused and neglected and needed protection. Following the Minister's statement, there was a huge number of applications by family members for the FCG (Hall *et al.*, 2016).

Meintjes *et al.* (2005) point out several concerns in the FCS being used as a means for families caring for orphans to get financial support. Firstly, there was a sharp rise in the number of applications, putting pressure on the courts and social workers. Secondly, the FCS was designed for the care and protection of children who were abused and neglected, and sometimes required emergency temporary placements. These children will not receive the necessary services and may be placed at greater risk. Meintjes *et al.* (2005) further questioned whether it is ethical for the state to provide support to poor people caring for children who were not their own, while failing to provide adequate financial support for parents living in poverty who were facing

difficulties in caring for their biological children. Additionally, there was the notion that only orphan-hood made children vulnerable, without considering the fact that other children in the context of HIV are vulnerable, such as those who live with their sick parents and in homes that have little or no income. Similarly, Hall and Proudlock (2011) contend that some children are worse off financially than orphans and that children with single or absent mothers may have equal need of income support.

Several submissions were made for a universal CSG for all children under the age of 18, with an increased amount. This grant will meet the needs of children in the context of HIV/AIDS, including children who are orphans, are poor and in need of protection (Hall & Proudlock, 2011; Goldblatt, 2014; Lund *et al.*, 2009; Meintjes *et al.*, 2005; Visser, 2009). After years of lobbying, the Social Assistance Act 13 of 2004 was replaced by the Social Assistance Amendment Act, 16 of 2020, to allow for a CSG Top-Up that will cater for orphans living with relatives. This grant was of an increased amount and could be applied for directly with SASSA without the need for a social worker or a court order. Therefore, families did not have to wait for long periods, and the workload of social workers would be reduced, allowing them to assist extended families and orphaned children with prevention and early intervention programmes (Proudlock *et al.*, 2024; RSA, 2020a; Sibanda & Ndamba, 2023). As of 2024, the CSG top-up stands at R750, which is lower than the FCG of R1180. However, it is close to the food poverty line and sufficient to cover a child's basic nutritional needs. The top-up grant was introduced in June 2022, and by June 2024, 73 988 children were benefiting from it (SASSA, 2024). While Hall (2024a) highlights the substantial uptake of the top-up, there are still likely many orphans who are not receiving it, if you consider the 2,8 million orphans in the country by 2022 (Hall (2024b)). This underscores the need for a stronger, coordinated effort by the government and other stakeholders to raise awareness and ensure more orphans can access the grant.

Broader discussions regarding the introduction of a Basic Income Grant (BIG) continue to reflect persistent concern about the adequacy of social protection, particularly for adults and families with no income. The introduction of the Social Relief of Distress grant during the COVID-19 pandemic continues to provide support to families with no income. However, the debate over implementing a permanent BIG, particularly in

relations to its sustainability remains ongoing (Moodley, 2020; Seekings & Matisonn, 2010; Sewpaul, 2005a; SASSA, 2024).

The South African government's response to addressing poverty and HIV-related vulnerability among children shows a very gradual evolution from fragmented, historically inequitable social assistance towards more inclusive and intergrated social protection frameworks. Nevertheless, persistent gaps in coverage, structural inequality and the complex realities of caregiving in the context of poverty and HIV highlight the need for continued policy innovation, coordination and critical evaluation of social interventions.

The breakdown of the family unit, poverty, unemployment and HIV made children susceptible to different social ills such as child abuse, neglect and abandonment, domestic violence and substance abuse. The following section examines these challenges in more detail.

2.8 CHILD ABUSE, NEGLECT AND ABANDONMENT

2.8.1 CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

Several children are abused and neglected that warrant their removal from their homes and placement into an under-resourced, overburdened social service system (Moodley *et al.*, 2018; Morton, 2015a; Palmieri & La Salle, 2016; Ruff *et al.*, 2019). Although the South African Constitution and legislation guarantees the rights of children to protection from abuse and neglect and freedom from violence, children continue to be the victims of maltreatment, abuse and violence (Mathews & Gould, 2017; Richter & Dawes, 2008; Spyrelis, 2013). Berry and Guthrie (2003), Mathews and Martin (2016), Richter and Dawes (2008) and Schiller and Strydom (2018) note that there is an increase in child abuse, neglect and exploitation of children in South Africa.

Richter and Dawes (2008) argue determining full extent of the problem of child abuse is challenging as it is often hidden and communities struggle in understanding the definition of abuse and reporting incidents of abuse. Despite the laws to protect children, they still face abuse in the domestic environment, the education system and the community. There are several reasons for abuse occurring. The patriarchal system

accords men power over women and children, including their perceived right to beat them. Poverty and unemployment are also linked to abuse. Family members experience stresses, men are at home due to being unemployed, parents travel long distances to work, leaving children unsupervised for long hours and placing them at risk. Many homes are overcrowded, resulting in children being exposed to sexual activities (Berry & Guthrie, 2003; Richter & Dawes, 2008; Spyrelis, 2013).

2.8.2 CHILD ABANDONMENT

A further factor to consider when looking at the care and protection of children is child abandonment. The Children's Act refers to an abandoned child as "one who has been obviously deserted by the parent, guardian or caregiver, or has for no apparent reason, had no contact with the parent, guardian or caregiver for at least three months" (RSA, 2005, p.18).

Child abandonment is considered to be a form of child abuse and has an adverse impact on the health, cognitive, social and emotional development of children (Berry & Malek, 2017). Child abandonment includes physical abandonment; emotional abandonment; medical abandonment and educational abandonment (Hammed *et al.*, 2020). Factors such as poverty, single parenting, maternal age, substance abuse, mental health concerns and a lack of social support contribute to child abandonment (Hammed *et al.*, 2020). Hammed *et al.*'s. (2020) study in Nigeria, revealed that child abandonment is caused by a breakdown of family relationships, death of one or both parents and childbirth out of wedlock. Uasheva *et al.*'s. (2016) study in Kazakhstan, with mothers who had abandoned their children, found that many women abandoned their children due to a lack of accommodation, education and income, the need to hide children born out of marriage, and having no support from the father of the child.

According to Blackie (2014) and Rosenberg (2020), child abandonment has increased in South Africa. However, the government does not provide official statistics on the exact number of abandoned children. Blackie's (2014) study in Johannesburg study found that the reasons for abandonment were poverty, prostitution, alcohol and drug abuse and violence. Rosenberg (2020) highlights that while South African law criminalises the act of abandonment, they provide no alternate for women who are

desperate and have little or no other viable choices. Very often, this results in the death of babies who are abandoned in fields, pit latrines and dustbins.

Children who are abandoned are placed into the CPS, whilst the case is being investigated (Blackie, 2014). The Pietermaritzburg Child Welfare Society (2023), reported that for the period 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023, 55 children needed urgent removal and placement in temporary safe care. Of these, 33 children were neglected, five were abused and eighteen children abandoned.

2. 9 DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Domestic violence is another contributory factor to the removal of children. Titi, *et al.* (2021) contend that 25%-45% of children in South Africa witness domestic violence caused by their mothers' partners, with long lasting effects on their mental well-being (Van Niekerk & Mathews, 2019).

Domestic violence is a criminal offence and falls within the ambit of the Domestic Violence Act (Cooper *et al.*, 2015). While the Act aims to protect the interests of women, Moore and Himonga (2018) argue that women may choose to resolve domestic violence traditionally, sometimes via family meetings as opposed to going through the legal system. This further serves to devalue victims of domestic violence and highlights the links between gender and violence (Jamieson *et al.*, 2018). Mkhwanazi *et al.* (2018) suggest that screening should be provided at health care facilities too so that victims of domestic violence are identified early and referred for appropriate services. Similarly, Jamieson *et al.* (2018) assert that when women are seeking services, they should be questioned regarding their children's safety to ensure that children receive appropriate services.

Beller (2015) questions whether children who witness domestic violence should be removed from the care of their mothers. In 2002 in the US, a judgement was passed that removing children from the care of their mother, based on her inability to prevent them from witnessing domestic violence was wrong, despite the emotional injury to a child from witnessing the domestic violence. It was argued that preventative services should be rendered to families experiencing domestic violence, as opposed to removing children (Beller, 2015). Similarly, Hanson (2011), Hester (2011) and

Jamieson *et al.* (2018) emphasize the need for a coordinated approach to domestic violence that shifts social norms and gender relations, and creates safety for both the adult victims and the children. This could keep children in the care of their parents.

2.10 SUBSTANCE ABUSE

A further aspect to consider is parental substance abuse and its impact on children (Berry & Malek, 2017). Laslett *et al.* (2013) note that alcohol abuse by parents has long been a concern for CPSs. Parental addiction has been associated with harm to children and child maltreatment. Alcohol abuse impacts family functioning, resulting in family and relationship conflicts, social isolation and financial stresses for families who are already struggling (Laslett *et al.*, 2013; Meyer *et al.*, 2010; Russell *et al.*, 2022). Naicker *et al.* (2021) add that families become dysfunctional due to substance abuse, and this could contribute to neglect, abuse, violence, abandonment, shame and poor communication.

Mbandlwa and Dorasamy (2020) assert that South Africa has the third highest alcohol intake in Africa and the 19th highest in the world. These researchers found that alcohol abuse is linked to increased levels of HIV infections, mental illness, partner abuse and unplanned pregnancies. For the period 1 April 2022-31 March 2023, the Pietermaritzburg Child Welfare Society noted an increase in parents abusing substances. This resulted in the removal of 19 children who were neglected by their mothers due to alcohol and drug abuse.

Meinhofer *et al.* (2020), Loria *et al.* (2021) and Stritzel (2022) note that the United States is experiencing a substance abuse crisis, resulting in an increase in foster care. Atkins and Durrance (2021) conducted a study in the USA to investigate the effects of the state level policies that equate parental substance abuse with child abuse and neglect. They found that state policies increased the number of children entering the FCS and recommends that policies focus on supportive interventions that allow children to remain in their families, because of the long-term consequences of the removal of children. Similarly, studies conducted by Rivera and Sullivan (2015), Russell *et al.* (2022) and Stritzel (2022) recommend providing substance abuse treatment to parents while their children are safe at home, in view of the stress that the removal causes for the child and family, as well as the overburdened FCS.

The discussions above illustrate how family environments can shift from being protective to becoming sources of harm. Importantly, these risks rarely occur in isolation; substance misuse is often linked to domestic violence, while neglect is strongly correlated with poverty and parental stress. By examining these factors together, it becomes evident that the pathways into the child protection system are complex and multi-layered, necessitating placement interventions such as foster care, which are examined in Chapter 3.

2.11 CARE AND PROTECTION OF CHILDREN IN SOUTH AFRICA

The care and protection of children in South Africa involves a number of role players. This includes DSD, DCPO that are registered non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development (DoJCD) and SASSA (DSD, 2010). The mandate of DSD is the care and protection of children and they mandate registered CPOs who are involved in the process. In terms of Section 107 of the Children's Act, the Director-General or the provincial head of DSD may designate an organisation that meets the prescribed criteria as a CPO. The CPO is assigned to carry out responsibilities in terms of the Act for the delivery of child protection services. Furthermore, DSD has to fund designated CPOs in terms of Section 105 of the Children's Act (RSA, 2005).

This relationship exposes the structural vulnerabilities in the child protection system. Designated CPO's are financially dependent on DSD subsidies which are often insufficient to cover operational costs. As a result, social workers in the CPOs earn a lower salary and have fewer, if no benefits as opposed to their DSD counterparts, creating disparities in workforce capacity and morale. Hence, the relationship between DSD and CPOs lacks meaningful cooperation and consultation, which impacts the rendering of child protection services (September, 2007; Van Niekerk & Matthias, 2019). Recently, reports from GroundUp, News24, and the Daily Maverick highlighted funding cuts by DSD to CPOs that exacerbate the vulnerability of children (De Klerk, 2024; Sikhakhane, 2024; Steyn & Mafata, 2024) as CPOs scale back services to children and their families, increasing the risk of children being placed in alternative care. A review of child protection services undertaken by Strydom *et al.* (2020) highlight that services were more reactive than preventative. Similarly, Skhosana (2020) found that a lack of funding to the NGO sector meant that they failed to deliver

social welfare services, especially when it came to early intervention and prevention services, limiting their capacity to address the underlying social determinants of poverty, unemployment, HIV/AIDS and family stress that contribute to child vulnerability. This indicates that while statutory mechanisms exist, systemic constraints impede the realisation of protective interventions and reinforces cycles of disadvantage for children and their families.

2.12 WHITE PAPER ON FAMILIES

Policy makers, academics, civil society and concerned citizens recognised that there was a need for an explicit policy framework for families in South Africa, particularly to address the consequences of colonisation and apartheid on families. This resulted in the development of a National Policy Framework for Families in 2001. The final draft version was issued in 2005, with goals that included “the protection and support of families through effective and efficient service delivery, the creation of an enabling environment to promote self-reliance of families and the promotion of inter-sectoral collaboration among stakeholders in the provision of services” (RSA, 2021, p.6). In September 2011, the South African government approved the Green Paper on Families, which focused on enhancing and strengthening families in South Africa (RSA, 2021).

Sewpaul (2005a, 2013a) criticised the Draft Family Policy for placing the responsibility of addressing South Africa’s major problems on individual and families, while neglecting the structural causes of unemployment, economic oppression, inequality and poverty that impact people’s lives. The document also focused on the moral regeneration of the individual, family and society, as a way of dealing with problems that people face, without cognisance of the broader systems that surround them. Likewise, Hochfeld (2007) criticised the Draft Family Policy for placing the responsibility to be self-reliant on families first and reinforcing the gendered role of care by women. The 2021 Revised White Paper responds to these criticisms by contextualising family support within contemporary socio-economic realities, recognising the interplay between structural disadvantage and caregiving capacity (RSA, 2021).

2.13 WHITE PAPER FOR SOCIAL WELFARE, 1997

The 1997 White Paper on Social Welfare represents an attempt to reduce historical inequalities in South Africa and transition towards developmental social welfare services. One area of focus of the White Paper is on strengthening families (RSA, 1997), to prevent the removal of children from their families (Strydom, 2010). However, structural pressures such as poverty, HIV and unemployment continue to undermine families' abilities to provide adequate care, leading to an increase in the number of children needing out of home care. While the White Paper advocates for the enhancement of existing mechanisms to support OVCs such as the extended family, family homes, foster care, adoption and institutional care, it simultaneously reflects neoliberal and NPM principles, that have impacted service delivery.

This creates a tension between the policy's objectives of preventing family breakdowns and protecting children and the realities of service delivery in under-resourced contexts. It suggests that while policy frameworks provide a foundation for child protection, their effectiveness is contingent upon sufficient funding, human resources and the inclusion of strategies that address socio-economic determinants of family vulnerability.

2.14 THE IMPACT OF NEOLIBERALISM AND NPM ON SOCIAL WORK AND FAMILIES

Neoliberalism and NPM have reshaped the social work landscape, influencing how families and children access support. According to Harvey, (2005, p. 2) "neoliberalism is understood as the theory of political and economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework, characterised by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices". Holscher & Sewpaul (2006, p. 254) write that "neoliberalism signifies a global, ideological, economic and political phenomenon which has been unfolding for the last thirty years".

Harris (2014) discusses three ways in which neoliberalism has impacted social work practice. The first is through marketization, and the growing expectations for social

services and NGOs to rely less on government support and funding and function as private operations. Additionally, service users are referred to as consumers and public organisations are expected to function as businesses (Sewpaul, 2013a; Spolander *et al.*, 2016). The second impact is through consumerisation with individuals, families and communities having to take responsibility for their own well-being (Harris, 2014).

The third impact of neoliberalism on social work is managerialisation and the focus on cost-efficiency, cost-effectiveness, procedures, norms and standards (Harris, 2014). Within this process, tasks are broken down into smaller tasks, so that the exact resources for each task can be calculated, and workers follow clear management guidelines, and instructions governed by manuals, policies and procedures (Spolander *et al.*, 2016). With NPM all problems are defined economically, and their resolutions are equated with productive outputs, to get more for less and to provide more value for money (Holscher & Sewpaul, 2006). According to Rogowski (2011) managerialism stems from the neoliberal ideology that the market is superior to the state and that the public sector, including social work, needs to be managed like businesses. Rogowski (2011) argues that the move to view the social worker in managerial terms contradicts social work values and its commitment to social justice and social change.

Neoliberalism has also contributed to the de-professionalisation of social work by reducing professional discretion, deskilling of social work and decreasing professional autonomy and identity (Ornellas *et al.*, 2020). Related to this is employing other unqualified personnel to undertake the tasks of social workers as this is a cheaper option, further devaluing the profession (Ornellas *et al.*, 2020; Spolander *et al.*, 2014; Spolander *et al.*, 2016).

Several authors have written about the impact of neoliberal policies in South Africa (Bond & Dor, 2003; Cheru, 2001; Holscher & Sewpaul, 2006; Sewpaul, 2005b, 2013a; Sewpaul & Holscher, 2004). Cheru (2001) contends that post-1994, there was a concerted effort from the ANC led government to right the wrongs of apartheid. The government developed The White Paper on Reconstruction and Development (RDP), which formed the basis to redress the economic legacies of apartheid. The government noted tremendous progress in addressing the past inequalities. However, the Growth, Employment and Redistribution Strategy (GEAR) soon replaced the RDP as it was noted that the strategies of the RDP were not sustainable. This was when

South Africa embraced neoliberalism as its core economic ideology (Cheru, 2001; Holscher & Sewpaul, 2006). Holscher and Sewpaul (2006) argue that this resulted in South Africa remaining the country with the highest inequality in the world. Furthermore, jobs were lost, unemployment rates surged, and basic service delivery was affected, impacting mostly the previously disadvantaged black population. Bond and Dor (2003) and Sewpaul (2005b, 2013a) contend that South Africa, being part of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), which is based on neoliberal strategies further served to marginalise the poor, entrenched poverty and worsen the circumstances of women and children, who are society's most vulnerable population.

Neoliberalism has significantly impacted the delivery of welfare services. The White Paper for Social Welfare, which aligned with neoliberal principles proposed that programme funding for Non-Profit Organisations (NPOs) be based on the submission of a business plan. NPOs would then undergo a tendering process, after which a contract would be signed. This approach was reinforced by the Financing Policy on Developmental Social Welfare Services, which operated on the premise that the government would act as a funder, rather than a purchaser, of services. Service Level Agreements (SLAs) were introduced between the state and the private sector that were based on specific criteria, such as target communities, service standards, outcomes, timeframes, reporting mechanisms, and Developmental Quality Assurance (DQA). The DQA would guide the government's decisions regarding the approval, increase, reduction, or withholding of funding (Sewpaul & Holscher, 2004; Strydom *et al.*, 2017).

According to Holscher and Sewpaul (2006) welfare services were being increasingly sought by the previously disadvantaged population groups and the responsibility to meet these social welfare needs fell on the NGOs that are in receipt of funding from DSD. These organisations expanded their services to include developmental and preventative programmes, in addition to fulfilling their statutory obligations, within their existing budgets that impacted the standard of welfare services (Strydom *et al.*, 2017). While the government committed, through the implementation of the White Paper on Social Welfare, to improved collaboration and partnership with the NGO sector, and a change in the funding focus to preventative and community development programmes, this did not materialise. As a result, welfare agencies continue to focus on statutory

and institutional care. Additionally, social workers in the NGO sector are paid lower salaries than their counterparts in the government sector, resulting in a high staff turnover and many social workers leaving the profession. Social workers who remain are forced to carry high caseloads and work with very limited resources. As such, they are not able to provide quality services to children and their families (Holscher & Sewpaul, 2006).

Sewpaul and Holscher (2004) argue that concepts like social justice, human rights, citizenship, and democracy cannot be effectively addressed within the narrow confines of market-driven language, which emphasizes profit, individualism, competition, and choice. They assert that this creates indifference toward inequality, hunger, deprivation, exploitation, and suffering. As a result, social work educators and practitioners must create opportunities for developing critical consciousness and engaging in transformative action. Ferguson and Lavalette (2006) contend that social work is worth defending as it helps improve lives, alleviate pain and distress, challenge stigma and discrimination, and contribute to the broader fight for social justice. However, achieving these goals requires adequate resources, commitment, and strong professional organization at both national and international levels. Sewpaul (2013a) advocates for social workers to directly intervene with individuals, families, and communities while simultaneously challenging structural inequalities. She further emphasizes that social workers worldwide have a duty to defend, enhance, and realise the fundamental values and principles outlined in the definition of social work (Sewpaul, 2013a, 2013b).

Dlamini and Sewpaul, 2015, Holscher and Sewpaul (2006), Ornellas *et al.* (2020), Rogowski (2011), Spolander *et al.* (2014) and Spolander *et al.* (2016) also call on social workers to participate in critical reflection and challenge the neoliberal rule collectively, and reclaim the social work profession. Then only can social workers fulfil the Global Definition of Social Work as adopted by the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) that states:

“Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human

rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledges, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing” (Sewpaul & Henrickson, 2019, pp.1-2).

2.15. CONCLUSION

The factors discussed in this chapter, poverty, HIV/AIDS, child abuse, neglect, abandonment, domestic violence, and substance abuse, demonstrate how structural and family vulnerabilities converge to place children at risk. These vulnerabilities, in turn, create the demand for alternative care arrangements when families are unable to fulfil their protective role. Additionally, the rise of neoliberalism and NMP has a profound impact on social work in the country. Neoliberal policies, characterized by budget cuts and a focus on market-driven approaches, have strained the resources available, particularly to NGOs, limiting their capacity to provide adequate support to vulnerable children and families.

The next chapter explores the mechanisms through which children are placed in foster care, examining both global and South African responses to child protection and the implications of these placement systems for children’s long-term development.

CHAPTER THREE: PLACEMENT OF CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter, the circumstances of children were analysed and presented to provide a contextual background on the factors that lead to children needing care and protection. This chapter briefly outlines the different types of alternative care, with the focus being on foster care and begins with an outline of the legislative framework for the care and protection of children internationally and in South Africa.

3.2 INTERNATIONAL INSTRUMENTS PERTAINING TO THE CARE AND PROTECTION OF CHILDREN

There are several international instruments pertaining to the care and protection of children, which were considered in South Africa's design and implementation of childcare legislation. The relevant sections of the international instruments are analysed, followed by an overview of South Africa's legislation pertaining to the care and protection of children.

As noted in the previous chapter, South Africa is a signatory to important international Charters that provide guidelines for the care and protection of children. These Charters include the CRC; the ACRWC and the United Nations Guidelines on the Alternative Care of Children. The sections which are pertinent to this study are discussed briefly. The CRC and the ACRWC contain several articles that must be considered in deciding alternative care for children. Article 3 of the CRC and Article 4 (1) of the ACRWC highlight that the "best interests of the child" must be the primary consideration when it comes to any actions related to children (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner, 1989; Organization of African Unity, 1990). Furthermore, Article 12 of the CRC and Article 4 (1)(1) of the ACRWC note that children must be consulted when it comes to decisions regarding their care. In doing so the child's capacities must be considered and they must have access to all the necessary information (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner, 1989; Organization of African Unity, 1990).

The CRC and the ACRWC acknowledges that the family holds the primary responsibility for a child's care. Article 20 of the CRC and Article 25 (2) of the ACRWC prioritise familial care for children not living with their parents. Furthermore, the

Charters stipulate that when family care is not available, it is the state's duty to establish procedures for providing alternative care for children. While the CRC and ACRWC emphasise the family as the cornerstone of a child's development, with familial care prioritised when parents are unable to fulfil their role, in the South African context, however, this principle is complicated by high levels of poverty, HIV/AIDS, and migration, which often weaken extended family networks. This gap may expose children to increased vulnerability as they may be left in informal care arrangements, that may place them at risk.

A key difference between the CRC and ACRWC is that the CRC includes Article 26, which guarantees social security for all children, including those in foster care, while the ACRWC includes Article 31, which outlines children's responsibilities towards their families, communities, and the state. However, children in alternative care due to abuse, abandonment or poverty may face difficulties in meeting these responsibilities due to their circumstances, compounding their feelings of exclusion and stigma (Perumal, 2011).

On 20 November 2009, the United Nations adopted the Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children to enhance the implementation of the CRC and other international frameworks protecting children who are not living with their parents. The Guidelines emphasize the importance of providing children with a stable family environment where their needs are met, and their rights are upheld. They outline various forms of alternative care, including kinship care, foster care, and other types, prioritizing kinship care before resorting to foster care. The Guidelines stress considering long-term stability in care placements and mandate consulting children in decisions about their care (United Nations General Assembly, 2010). In the South African context, the inclusion of different types of care included in the Guidelines is particularly significant given the high number of children being cared for informally by relatives and the growing number of children in formal foster care due to the disintegration of families (Perumal, 2011). However, these placements often occur without financial support, leaving caregivers, many of whom are elderly grandmothers, overstretched. Therefore, although kinship care provides continuity of identity and belonging, without material and psychosocial support it can entrench children's vulnerabilities rather than reduce them.

The Charters highlights the international community's commitment to children's rights, and outlines the responsibilities of governments in ensuring that these rights are upheld. They also serve as a foundation for countries to develop their own legislative frameworks on the care and protection of children. However, families and children face several challenges as outlined in the previous chapter. This chapter further explores additional issues, including the lack of resources for quality alternative care, the balance between a child's right to family life and the need for alternative care and stigma pertaining to being in foster care.

3.3 BRIEF GLOBAL CONTEXT OF ALTERNATIVE CARE

The placement of children who cannot live with their parents in alternative care is a global phenomenon, with each country having their own legislation and policies to guide the practice of alternative care.

Caring for children by family members is a time-honoured tradition in the USA and other countries. In the USA, for years, such kinship care was not considered to be part of the formal FCS, until advocates argued that children living with relatives should get the same foster care benefits as children living with non-relatives. This led to more children living in kinship foster care. Foster care in the USA includes care with relatives, non-relatives and other types of care arrangements such as emergency shelters, foster boarding homes, group homes and group residences, thus incorporating a wide range of substitute living arrangements for children (VanBergeijk & McGowan, 2001).

The UK also noted an increase in kinship foster care (Guishard-Pine *et al.*, 2007; Sebba & Luke, 2019). Guishard-Pine *et al.* (2007) and VanBergeijk and McGowan (2001) note that legislation in the UK and USA has evolved over the years to include permanency planning for children in foster care. This means that children could not remain within the FCS indefinitely and that the professionals working with children in care must have a plan in place to reunite children with their biological families.

Foster care is also the preferred option for children in other countries who are not residing with their parents. In Canada, there were around 43 880 children and youth in foster care in 2016 (Magee *et al.*, 2019). Van Holen *et al.* (2020) note that in

Flanders, foster care with families is the preferred option for children who cannot live with their parents. As of 2018, there were 7567 children placed in foster care with families in Flanders.

While foster care is the preferred form of care in most countries, in other countries such as Portugal and several Eastern-European countries, residential care remains the predominant form of care. Some of the reasons provided for this is that there are fewer families available for foster care; recruiting, training and retaining foster families is a difficult process; the turnover of foster families; and there are more older children with behavioural and emotional difficulties than there are available foster families (Magalhaes *et al.*, 2022). For children, this often translates into instability, weaker attachments and poorer developmental outcomes.

3.4 CARE OF CHILDREN IN AFRICA

Across Sub-Saharan Africa, the extended family remains the cornerstone of children's care, particularly in the wake of HIV/AIDS, which left millions of children orphaned. (Makuu, 2019; Manyeli, 2010; Mushunje, 2014; Roby & Shaw, 2008; Rukundo & Daniel, 2016). Each country's response is based on its resources, unique policies and legislative framework. Mushunje (2014), who examined the role of extended families in Zimbabwe, argues that despite the extended family being placed under tremendous pressure, it remains a reliable informal safety net for OVC.

Informal foster care is another common arrangement for orphans and vulnerable children (OVC). While it can provide opportunities such as access to education and a sense of stability, it also presents significant risks. In Nigeria, Nnama-Okechukwu *et al.* (2020) found that although children in informal foster care sometimes benefitted from schooling, they were also exposed to abuse. Similarly, Shibuya and Taylor (2013), studying orphaned children in Mozambique, observed that those placed in informal foster care were more likely to face neglect, maltreatment, and abuse compared to children supported by non-governmental care organisations. These studies illustrate that without clear oversight and accountability, informal foster care can leave children vulnerable to exploitation or being used as domestic labour. By contrast, Muchinako *et al.* (2018), through research in Zimbabwe, demonstrated that formal foster care not only supports deinstitutionalization but also offers a more cost-

effective care option, suggesting it may provide a more sustainable and protective alternative. While the African context underscores both the resilience and fragility of extended family and informal care systems, the absence of formal oversight and state support often leaves children vulnerable to exploitation, neglect, and poverty.

3.5 ALTERNATIVE CARE IN SOUTH AFRICA

The following discussion offers an overview of legislation in South Africa related to child care and protection, followed by an in-depth analysis of care models in the country, with particular emphasis on foster care as a key alternative care strategy.

3.5.1 SOUTH AFRICAN LEGISLATION ON THE CARE AND PROTECTION OF CHILDREN

3.5.1.1 SOUTH AFRICAN CONSTITUTION, 1996

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa was adopted to give effect to the country's democratic principles and serves as the foundation for all legislation and policies, including those related to the care and protection of children. Section 28(1)(b) provides that every child has the right to family care, parental care, or appropriate alternative care when removed from the family, while Section 28(1)(c) guarantees access to basic nutrition, shelter, health care services, and social services. In addition, Section 28(2) establishes that the best interests of the child are of paramount importance in every matter concerning the child (RSA, 1996a, pp. 12–13). Despite these constitutional provisions, the gap between children's rights and their lived realities remains significant, as outlined in Chapter 2. Many children enter foster care precisely because their families are unable to provide adequate care, and the principle of acting in the child's best interests often becomes contested in practice, as explored later in this chapter.

3.5.1.2 CHILDREN'S ACT, 2005

The Children's Act came into effect from 1 April 2010 and provided a comprehensive framework for the care and protection of children aligning South African legislation with international Charters as well as the Constitution of the country. Section 9 of the

Children's Act notes "that in all matters concerning the care, protection and well-being of the child, the child's best interest is of paramount importance" (RSA, 2005, p. 39).

One of the most significant developments in the legislation was the inclusion of Section 10 in the Children's Act, which provides for the participation of children in decisions affecting their care, taking into account their age, maturity, and stage of development. This aligns with international charters that emphasize children's rights to be heard, and the practical implementation of this principle is explored later in this chapter. Another key feature of the Act is its focus on prevention and early intervention services aimed at strengthening families and enhancing their capacity to care for children (Matthias, 2004; September, 2008). However, despite this inclusion, the delivery of such services faces present challenges, particularly due to limited financial and human resources. As highlighted in Chapter 2, these constraints continue to hinder the effective implementation of early intervention and prevention services.

According to Section 150 of the Children's Act "a child to be found in need of care and protection if the child:

- (a) Has been abandoned or orphaned and is without any viable means of support;
- (b) Displays behaviour which cannot be controlled by the parent or caregiver;
- (c) Lives or works on the streets or begs for a living;
- (d) Is addicted to a dependence-producing substance and is without any support to obtain treatment for such dependency;
- (e) Has been exploited or lives in circumstances that exposes the child to exploitation;
- (f) Lives in or is exposed to circumstances which may seriously harm that child's physical, mental or social well-being;
- (g) May be at risk if returned to the custody of the parent, guardian or caregiver as there is reason to believe that he or she will live in or be exposed to circumstances which may seriously harm the physical, mental or social well-being of the child;

(h) Is in a state of physical or mental neglect; or is being maltreated, abused, deliberately neglected or degraded by a parent, a caregiver, a person who has parental responsibilities and rights or a family member of the child or by a person under whose control the child is” (RSA, 2005, p. 142).

Section 150 (a) of the Children’s Act has been amended to provide clarity on when an orphaned or abandoned child should be considered to be “in need of care and protection”. An “orphaned or abandoned child is now defined as in need of care and protection if the child “has no family member who is able and suitable to care for that child”. This means that “an orphaned or abandoned child who is already in the care of a family member is not automatically considered to be a child in need of care or protection” (RSA, 2022, p.2).

Once a child is found to be in need of care and protection, the Court may make several orders in terms of Section 156 of the Children’s Act. One such order is in terms of “Section 156 (1) (e) (i) of the Act placing a child in foster care with a suitable foster parent. In addition to this, Section 171 of the Children’s Act makes provisions for a transfer order issued by DSD, in respect of a child in alternative care. Of relevance here, would be the transfer of a child who would have been placed in a child and youth care centre to the care of a suitable foster parent. A child may be placed in foster care with a family member, a person who is not a family member or a registered cluster foster care scheme” (RSA, 2005, pp. 151-152; 164-165). In foster care, “full” parental responsibilities are not given solely to the foster parent; rather, this is shared between the state and the foster parent. While foster care is intended to be temporary, until children are reunited with the parents, in South Africa many children remain in foster care until they exit the FCS (Van Der Walt, 2018).

Once a child is placed in foster care, the social worker submits a report to the court in terms of Section 159 of the Children’s Act to extend the foster care order, which enables the foster parent to continue receiving the FCG. Section 186 of the Act further provides for the court to extend foster care orders until the child turns 18 years old, particularly in cases involving orphans. When orders are issued in terms of Section 186, the requirement for social workers to review foster care orders every two years is removed, thereby reducing their administrative workload (Van der Walt, 2018).

While this provision offers benefits, such as greater stability for foster families, no disruptions in accessing the FCG, reduced bureaucratic delays, and more time for social workers to focus on other child protection matters, it also carries certain risks. Extended orders may limit regular oversight of children's circumstances, potentially allowing challenges within placements to go unnoticed, and unaddressed.

Of particular relevance to this study is Section 176 of the Children's Act which states that "a child who was placed in alternative care is entitled to remain in that care until the end of the year in which they reach the age of 18 years. Furthermore, a person who is over 18 years old may apply to DSD to remain in foster care until they turn 21 to enable completion of their education. The caregiver must be willing and able to care for that person". The social worker completes a report and submits it to DSD, who is responsible for issuing a Section 176 order (RSA, 2005, p. 168).

Although the Children's Act was widely welcomed as a progressive step toward a developmental approach in South Africa's CPS, Jamieson *et al.* (2012), Ndlazi (2015), and Sibanda and Lombard (2015) highlight challenges in its implementation. Staff required retraining to effectively apply the Act, and uncertainty arose regarding whether orphaned children living with relatives qualified for care and protection. Consequently, interpretations of the term "visible means of support" varied among presiding officers, leading to inconsistencies in service provision and some children being denied access to support and the FCG (Hall *et al.*, 2016). Studies by Ndlazi (2015) and Sibanda and Lombard (2015) with social workers found that they experienced several challenges in implementing the Act, such as staff shortages, high caseloads, and a lack of resources. Challenges also arose within the courts, where inconsistent expectations among presiding officers created additional burdens for social workers. For example, some presiding officers expected social workers to conduct educational assessments, a task typically assigned to school social workers, or to provide documentation for biological parents who had been out of contact for many years. The shortage of presiding officers, combined with their limited understanding of the Children's Act, further hindered effective implementation.

It must be noted that some of the challenges discussed above, were highlighted even before the Children's Act came into effect. This included the training of presiding

officers and social workers, increasing human and financial resources as well as infrastructure to be able to implement the provisions of the Children's Act. Unfortunately, the government was unable to address these issues before the new Children's Act came into effect, resulting in challenges in implementing it (Matthias, 2004; September, 2008; September & Dinbabo, 2008). These challenges reveal that progressive legislation alone cannot secure children's rights without adequate investment in the structures and human resources that operationalise it.

3.6 MODELS OF CARE FOR CHILDREN IN SOUTH AFRICA

South Africa's care landscape reflects a mix of formal and informal arrangements such as kinship care, foster care, cluster foster care, adoption and institutional care. The preferred care arrangement for children is within a family context, rather than institutional care (Mkhwanazi *et al.*, 2018).

Foster (2004), Freeman and Nkomo (2006) and Mkhwanazi *et al.* (2018) emphasize the crucial role of informal kinship care and the extended family in supporting OVC. Many children who do not live with their parents are cared for by grandparents or other relatives. Malan and Heyman (2020) highlight that while the Children's Act addresses alternative care, it does not include provisions for informal alternative care. Their research with South African social workers found that informal care serves as a quick solution for children in need of protection, helping to reduce child-headed households and ease the foster care backlog. However, the absence of clear guidelines for informal alternative care may lead to child abandonment and situations where biological parents reclaim their children without being prepared to care for them properly, increasing the vulnerability of children.

Cluster foster care, which allows for up to six children to live within a home environment, is managed by NGOs, and is overseen by DSD. Van der Walt (2018) points out that this type of care has been criticised as the Children's Act fails to provide the parameters and contents of cluster foster care. Similarly, Gallinetti and Sloth-Nielsen (2010) express concern about how caregivers within cluster foster care are selected and approved. Such gaps in oversight risk undermining the stability and security that cluster foster care is intended to provide for children.

Adoption is a “form of alternative care designed to offer a child a permanent, safe, and healthy environment. It grants the adoptive parents’ full parental responsibilities and rights, including guardianship” (DSD, 2012, p. 178). Unlike foster care, which is generally intended as a temporary measure with the state retaining ultimate responsibility for the child, adoption creates a permanent legal relationship in which the child is fully integrated into the adoptive family. Adoption is distinctive in its focus on permanency, offering children stability and security without the need for state oversight or periodic renewal of care orders.

Institutional care is a further type of alternative care. According to Perumal and Kasiram (2009), with the traditional family structure being placed under pressure in South Africa, it is not always possible to place children with families, resulting in their placement in child and youth care centres (CYCCs), which should be an option of last resort. Large-scale institutional facilities are not equipped to meet the individual psychosocial needs of children and might expose children to abuse and exploitation (Foster, 2004; Makuu, 2019; Rukundo & Daniel, 2016). Furthermore, institutional care is an expensive option, and youth transitioning out of CYCCs are often unprepared for independent living (Moodley *et al.* (2018).

More recently, Seepamore and Seepamore (2020) discussed a model of foster care piloted in Alexandra Township in response to the large number of orphans in need of care. The model shifted away from a narrow casework approach and instead harnessed community strengths, with the social worker adopting multiple roles to facilitate care through the relevant legal channels. To address the shortage of social workers, the model proposed drawing on student social workers and unemployed graduates. Group work was provided to foster parents in their homes and communities, as well as to foster children in their schools, while social workers collaborated with other service providers such as the South African Police Service, the Department of Social Development, and the Department of Home Affairs. The model was later implemented in two other South African communities and was considered effective, as it maximised local resources and actively involved community members as partners in children’s care. Yet these initiatives remain the exception rather than the rule, raising questions about their scalability and long-term sustainability within a

South African context marked by chronic resource shortages and entrenched challenges such as poverty and unemployment.

3.7 FOSTER CARE IN SOUTH AFRICA

When children enter foster care, they are considered wards of the state, and their placements are intended to be short-term, subject to a review every two years, and if they are separated from their family, the goal is to reintegrate them (Mkhwanazi *et al.*, 2018). Foster care “promotes the goal of permanency planning, first towards family reunification or by connecting children to other safe and nurturing family relationships to last a lifetime” (RSA, 2005, p. 171), and continues to be the preferred option of alternative care (Boning & Ferreira, 2013). In practice, however, it embodies the broader contradictions of South Africa’s child protection system, while designed to uphold children’s best interests, systemic inefficiencies and resource constraints often compromise this goal, as elaborated on later in the chapter.

According to DSD (2010), the service delivery of foster care should be aligned to the developmental approach to make sure that the individual’s needs are met, in relation to the environment and creating opportunities for economic development. While placing a child in foster care will meet their immediate needs for care and protection, and accessing the FCG, the goal should be to facilitate the foster child meeting their developmental milestones and attaining a certain level of education. However, Ngwabi’s (2014) study with social workers employed in CPOs revealed barriers to rendering developmental foster care services. The barriers included a lack of knowledge of the developmental approach, the focus on administrative tasks, high caseloads and limited funding by DSD to facilitate developmental projects and programmes, including a lack of financial and human resources. As a result, services to foster children are reduced, which directly undermines their developmental outcomes.

3.7.1 FOSTER CARE CRISIS

Chapter 2 highlighted how the HIV epidemic contributed to the rising number of orphans requiring placement in foster care. This increased numbers from approximately 50 000 children in foster care to about 500 000 in 2010, particularly in

related kinship foster care placements (Perumal, 2011; Pretorius & Ross, 2010; Schiller, 2015). The high number of foster care placements resulted in a backlog of foster care matters that had to be reviewed by the Children's Courts. Studies by Mokgalapa and Rapholo (2021) and Ngwenya (2011) with social workers revealed that factors such as high caseloads, staff turnover, lack of resources, lack of cooperation from service users, and challenges with the court contributed to the foster care backlog.

In July 2010, DSD submitted to the Portfolio Committee of Social Development that 299 076 foster care orders had lapsed, resulting in more than 50% of children in foster care not having valid court orders (Gudula-Koyana & Khanye, 2019). In 2011, the Centre for Child Law took DSD to Court as approximately 120 000 foster care grants had stopped being paid to children. This meant that these children were not afforded the protection of a legal order and the non-payment of the grant meant that the basic needs of children were unmet, creating a "crisis" in the FCS (Fortune, 2016; Van der Walt, 2018).

The Pretoria North Gauteng High Court subsequently validated all the orders that had expired or were about to expire and instructed DSD develop a comprehensive legal solution to the foster care challenge. In the interim, from 2011, DSD was allowed to extend the orders administratively for children in foster care, without going to Court. DSD had until 2014 to come up with a solution to prevent orders lapsing in the future. However, DSD only came up with a solution in November 2023.

In order to come up with a solution to the foster care crisis as ordered by the High Court in 2011, certain aspects of the Social Assistance Act 13 of 2004 and the Children's Act needed to be amended. It took over a decade, but both these Acts have since been amended to allow relatives caring for orphans to apply for the CSG top-up grant directly with SASSA, without going through a social worker and the court, thus reducing the number of children entering the FCS (Proudlock *et al.*, 2024). The introduction of the CSG top-up provides a promising shift, reducing reliance on foster care for kinship placements. However, it also raises critical questions: Will it sufficiently ease social workers' caseloads? Will it reach children equitably? And will it prevent the recurrence of systemic collapse?.

The number of children in foster care has declined in recent years, a trend likely influenced by children ageing out of the system and a reduction in foster care applications. According to the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA, 2024), 270,320 children were in foster care as of June 2024, based on the number of foster care grants issued during that period. Since the CSG top-up was only introduced in 2022, it is not considered a contributing factor to this decline (Hall, 2024a).

There are various processes within the FCS, which are discussed below.

3.7.2 THE PROCESSES IN THE PLACEMENT OF CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE

3.7.2.1 REMOVAL OF CHILDREN AND EMERGENCY PLACEMENTS

According to RSA (2005, pp.142-144), “children are found to be in need of care and protection in terms of Section 150 of the Children’s Act. When a child is found to be in need of care and protection, the children’s court issues a temporary order placing the child in a safe place in terms of Section 151 of the Children’s Act. A social worker or police officer may remove a child to temporary safe care, without a court order, in terms of Section 152 of the Children’s Act, if there are reasonable grounds to believe that a child needs emergency protection. The matter must be brought before the children’s court within 24 hours. The parent, guardian or caregiver must also be informed within 24 hours of the removal of the child, if the parent can be traced”. When it comes to temporary safe care, the first option is to consider immediate and extended family. If a child is at risk in their home, they will be placed with an approved safety parent, in a place of safety, or at a CYCC, ensuring that their best interests remain the top priority. Hope and Van Wyk (2019) and Keddell (2016) contend that the best interest of the child is difficult to implement in practice as it is open to interpretation and subjectivity..

In January 2012, the Star newspaper reported on a raid conducted in August 2010 by social workers, police and city officials to target people begging on the streets with their children. The officials did not have a court order for the raid, however, they removed a three-year-old girl from a man who repairs shoes, and two other girls, aged one and three years from their blind mother who was begging on the street. The cobbler had taken his daughter to work because his partner was giving birth to their

second child and the blind woman had an assistant. The parents, with the help of the Centre for Child Law and Lawyers for Human Rights, approached the Pretoria High Court and the two girls were returned to their mother, eleven days after their removal and the three-year-old was returned to her father, later, under the supervision of the social worker (Mooki, 2012).

According to Zaal and Matthias (2013) removing children from their families is harmful and must be the last resort and carefully reviewed. The decision to remove is often made under difficult circumstances and social workers and the police work under pressure, have heavy caseloads and may lack specialist training. Similarly, Trivedi (2019) contends that the removal of children has many consequences such as separation and attachment disorders, trauma as a result of the removal itself, grief and confusion due to the separation from one's family and suggests that when children are removed, the courts must consider the harmful effects of the removal. Storhaug and Kojan's (2017) study on emergency placements in Norway found that nearly half of the children returned home, suggesting that many of these placements may have been unnecessary. Their findings raised concerns about the assessments and decision-making processes leading to emergency removals. The study also highlighted that some placements could have been avoided if families had received timely support and intervention. Havnen *et al.* (2023) highlighted the critical role of thorough assessments and investigations in preventing unnecessary emergency placements, emphasizing the potential negative consequences for both children and families and suggesting that the focus should be on averting emergency placements.

Hope and Van Wyk's (2019) study in South African study with social workers from CPOs and residential facilities, and child and youth care workers highlighted that the best interest principle was not applied throughout the child protection process. At times, social workers from designated CPOs prioritize the immediate removal of the child without considering long-term care arrangements or maintaining contact with the biological family. Additionally, due to resource constraints, children are sometimes placed in temporary safe care that do not accommodate their language, religious, or cultural needs.

Naicker and Botha (2023) conducted a study in Gauteng, South Africa, with social workers, and their managers employed by DSD on decision making in the foster care

process. They found that when it came to the removal of children who were at risk, some social workers relied on their intuition, while some relied on analytical risk assessment tools. Furthermore, most social workers do not use the assessment tools provided by DSD as they carry high caseloads and do not have the time, and their decisions regarding the removal of children were not always transparently reflected in the files. Hope and Van Wyk (2018) also found that in emergency child protection, social workers were not guided by legislation and policies, but by their instinct. Storhaug *et al.* (2019) conducted a study in Norway exploring caseworkers' perceptions of emergency placements. The findings revealed that caseworkers often felt they intervened too late and that the focus was primarily on parents rather than the children. Participants also reported lacking adequate opportunities and skills for conducting observations and assessments, leading them to rely heavily on the evaluations of other professionals when making decisions about emergency removals.

Emergency removals illustrate the paradox of foster care interventions; measures intended to protect children may instead compound their vulnerability and compromise their best interests if not implemented with precision, sensitivity, and robust support systems. Children's well-being ultimately depends on the system's ability to balance urgent protection with the preservation of stability, identity, and belonging. The cases presented above emphasize that removing children from parental care must be carefully reviewed. Moreover, the case of a parent begging on the streets with their children underscores the difficult realities many parents face, as they struggle to balance providing care for their children while simultaneously trying to earn a livelihood to support their families (Ozah & Skelton, 2018). This once again brings to light the state's inadequacies in supporting biological parents to care for their children. From a social development perspective, interventions should not only focus on the child in isolation but also aim to strengthen family and community capacities, addressing structural inequalities and providing holistic support that enables parents to meet their children's developmental and economic needs (Patel *et al.*, 2017).

Following the placement of a child in temporary safe care, the social worker must investigate the reasons for the removal and the circumstances of everyone involved in the case. If the child is found to be in need of care and protection, the social worker

will make a recommendation to place the child in foster care, with a related or unrelated foster parent, cluster foster care or at a CYCC (DSD, 2010).

3.7.2.2 SCREENING OF PROPOSED FOSTER PARENTS

The proposed foster parent must be screened by a social worker to be “a fit and proper person to be entrusted with the foster care of the child, be willing and able to undertake the responsibility of such care and be able to provide a safe environment that is conducive to the child’s growth and development” (RSA, 2005, p. 171). On paper, the screening process appears robust; however, in practice, it is marked by limitations that affect the quality and durability of placements.

Carter and Van Breda (2016) developed a protocol comprising an assessment tool with guidelines to assist social workers in screening and assessing foster parents. The tool is based on four areas that include the ability to provide unconditional love, safety, stability and nurturing to the child which they suggest be used in conjunction with the Guidelines for the Effective Management of Foster Care to assess the suitability of the prospective foster parent. However, the Children’s Act stipulates that social workers must complete the investigations and placement of a child within 90 days. Due to these time constraints, the screening process may sometimes be rushed or compromised and this could impact the long-term care of the child (RSA, 2005). The result is that children may be placed with caregivers whose suitability has not been fully assessed, resulting in the placements breakdowns or repeated moves that undermine a child’s stability and sense of belonging. To address this, Carter and Van Breda (2016) and Manthosi and Carelse (2022) suggest that since screening is a complicated and lengthy process, there should be a standardised process to screen prospective foster parents, to ensure that children’s best interests are fully protected.

Although guidelines to screen, assess and train foster parents are available, within the South African context, the AIDS pandemic impacted families tremendously. As result, grandparents and other kin were forced to assume responsibility for children who were orphaned (Perumal, 2011; Schiller, 2015; Van der Westhuizen *et al.*, 2012). Manthosi and Carelse (2022) and Pretorius and Ross (2010) found that the process of screenings in kinship care placements were not as thorough as screenings in non-kinship care placements.

If a child is already in the care of a family member, the social worker will conduct an assessment and place the child in the foster care of that family member. The DSD guidelines to screen and assess proposed foster parents do not differentiate between related and non-related placements. From practice, however, in family-related placements, since the caregiver is already caring for the child and the placement merely needs to be formalised to access the FCG, they receive little or no training on caring for children who have experienced trauma.

When a child is removed from parental care and placed in foster care, a permanency plan should be included in the court order. This plan involves the child, their parents, and the prospective caregiver, and is designed to support family preservation and reunification. Complementing this are an individual development plan and a care plan for each child, which should be reviewed regularly to monitor progress for both the child and the family (DSD, 2012). In practice, however, the effectiveness of these tools is often undermined by a shortage of social workers and high caseloads. As a result, reviews are frequently conducted more to meet administrative requirements than to assess whether placements are truly meeting the child's needs.

3.7.3 EXPERIENCES OF FOSTER YOUTH IN CARE

3.7.3.1 TOXIC SHAME AND STIGMA

Anger, fear, and sadness are widely recognised as common emotional responses among children in care; however, a particularly pervasive and corrosive emotion is shame. Shame can be understood as a deep sense of not belonging, feeling unloved, and perceiving oneself as inherently flawed (Bath, 2019). This emotion is strongly linked to experiences of abandonment, abuse, and exposure to domestic violence (Bradshaw, 1988; Hoekstra & Katz, 2021). When maltreatment is chronic, children frequently internalise these negative experiences, leading to a deeply entrenched sense of shame (Brenninkmeyer, 2017). Bradshaw (1988) conceptualises this form of shame as “toxic shame” a debilitating condition that binds individuals to feelings of worthlessness, defectiveness, and isolation. Constantian (2019) extends this by arguing that childhood trauma is a primary source of toxic shame, contaminating developmental trajectories when children absorb the shamelessness of abusive or neglectful caregivers and misattribute it to themselves.

Children in care often experience this feeling of shame. They experience a deep sense of not belonging, being defective and feeling unloved. This feeling of shame is often seen as a toxic force that drives behaviour that could include aggression and self-harm. In addition, the concern with shame is that it is often a hidden and unspoken emotion that makes it difficult to understand and harder to identify (Bath, 2019). Bradshaw (1988, 1990) emphasizes the role of the "inner child" in carrying these deep-seated wounds of shame. According to Bradshaw (1988, 1990), the inner child represents the part of us that holds onto the emotional experiences of our early years, especially the traumatic ones. For children in care, the inner child is often wounded and burdened by the toxic shame inflicted through trauma and abuse.

Bradshaw (1988) identifies different hiding places of toxic shame such as denial, repression, compulsive and addictive behaviours, and self-destructive behaviours as the inner child seeks to cope with the feelings of worthlessness and rejection. Bradshaw (1988; 1990), a prominent figure in the field of healing childhood trauma, emphasizes that unresolved trauma and a wounded inner child can impact an individual's behaviour and sense of self well into adulthood and underscores the necessity of seeking support from therapists and support groups that provide a safe and non-threatening environment for healing the inner child. This process begins with acknowledging and reconnecting with the inner child, recognizing the wounds inflicted during childhood and understanding the origins of toxic shame. Healing the inner child means being self-compassionate and providing the love, care, and nurturing that was lacking in childhood. Additionally, finding a supportive social network is crucial. This network should consist of individuals who offer love and acceptance, enabling the person to gradually love and accept themselves.

Similarly, Bath (2019) points out that in working with children in care and their feelings of shame, is the understanding that the challenging symptoms and behaviours presented by young people may be coping strategies rather than "bad" or "manipulative" behaviours. They need carers who are able to re-establish trust by being trustworthy, honest, reliable and available. It is also important to give a voice to shame as this will break the silence and secrecy surrounding the shame. It is through this process and the opportunity for positive affirmation and support to the young person that helps them to develop trust and feel comfortable to share their inner

feelings and thoughts. Taylor's (2022) study with adolescents found that young people found it difficult to talk about shame. The young people in the study revealed that feeling understood, having a better understanding of their shame, and feeling like they belong are helpful in managing shameful experiences.

Fieller and Loughlin (2022) assert that foster children are vulnerable to exclusion and face discrimination from their peers and their community, merely by being in care. Dansey *et al.* (2019) also notes that foster children are subject to stigma. Although foster care is intended to provide a safe alternative for children who cannot live with their parents, VanBergeijk and McGowan (2001) contend that the term "foster care" has a negative connotation and it implies a difference. Therefore, many foster children do not want to acknowledge that they are foster children. Gerber and Dicker (2006), Krebs and Pitcoff (2006) and Johnson *et al.* (2020) also point out that teenagers in foster care are often embarrassed about their status. They believe that the world thinks that they are in foster care because they are bad and are reluctant to disclose to other students and teachers that they in foster care. They fear it will impact friendships and as a result isolate themselves from their peers, are withdrawn and do not trust other children or adults.

A study by Johnson *et al.* (2020) with forty-six high school foster youth in the USA, revealed that they withheld their identity as foster children as a buffer against the negative consequences of stigma because they wanted to belong, feel accepted and fit in at school. The youth in the study shared the misconceptions and stereotypes about "foster youth" as deviant, and "problem kids", which undermines their self-confidence and alienates them from others at school. Teachers and peers also contributed to them feeling different.

Sinclair *et al.* (2005) adds that "foster care" is stigmatised and not seen as "normal" because foster children are not able to indulge in normal activities such as sleepovers and school trips without the permission of the social worker. Similarly, Moodley *et al.* (2018) found that youth in CYCCs experienced stigma and discrimination. Most of the youth in the study reported that they did not disclose that they lived in CYCCs for fear of judgment.

Foster children also feel stigmatised by their families and communities and as a result struggle with anxiety, low self-esteem and depression (Mampane & Ross, 2017). According to Shuker *et al.* (2019) the relationships in the teenager's life are important as they can either stigmatise or normalise experiences. They point out that it is the responsibility of the foster caregivers and the professionals to acknowledge the vulnerabilities of children and support them without creating additional stigma. Kantor *et al.* (2022) conducted a study with forty-six former foster youth to investigate why they did not access mental health services. A finding was the fear of being stigmatized by professionals, and society in general, including peers. The participants also shared feelings of shame because they were in foster care and fears of rejection for experiencing mental health problems and seeking assistance.

For adolescents, the consequences of stigma are particularly pronounced given their developmental task of identity formation. Perumal (2011) found that being singled out at school, such as through visible visits from social workers, intensified feelings of stigma and exclusion. Dansey *et al.* (2019) emphasise that children in care often internalise these negative judgements, resulting in diminished self-esteem and identity confusion. These studies suggest that shame and stigma are not only emotional burdens but also social processes that shape the developmental trajectories of children in care.

Shame and stigma work together to undermine the goals of foster care. They silence children, making them less likely to share their struggles, which limits access to support, weakens friendships, and disrupts identity development during a stage when belonging is especially important. This shows a clear contradiction, while policies focus on protection and inclusion, children often experience silence, secrecy, and exclusion in reality.

3.7.3.2 BREAKDOWN OF FOSTER PLACEMENTS

The placement of a child in foster care has an entry point which is the start of the placement and an exit point (when the child reaches 18 years of age or 21) to complete schooling or tertiary education, if not reunited with their family. However, sometimes foster placements break down (Mnisi & Botha, 2016). According to Montserrat *et al.*

(2020), the breakdown in foster care is when the placement terminates unexpectedly and before the end of the foster care plan.

South African research highlights the multifaceted reasons for breakdowns. Mnisi and Botha (2016), in a study with adolescents and foster parents, identified behavioural difficulties, ongoing contact with biological families, and inappropriate sexual behaviour as major contributing factors. Adolescents also reported abuse within foster homes as a driver of disruption, raising questions about the quality of safeguarding mechanisms in place. Mashiloane (2016), focusing on foster parents and social workers in Gauteng, similarly found that children's behavioural and educational challenges were central to placement instability, suggesting that foster care systems often struggle to provide adequate support for children with complex needs.

International studies aligns with these findings, reinforcing the centrality of child behaviour in placement breakdown. Studies in the United States (Koh *et al.*, 2014), Sweden (Vinnerljung *et al.*, 2017), and Flanders (Vanderfaeillie *et al.*, 2018) demonstrate that behavioural challenges are consistently associated with disruptions. Vanderfaeillie *et al.* (2018) also emphasise relational dynamics, noting that conflict between birth and foster families, as well as mismatches in parenting styles, significantly destabilise placements. These findings underscore that breakdowns are rarely attributable to a single factor but emerge from the interaction between child behaviour, family relationships, and systemic responses.

Van Rooij *et al.* (2019) broaden this perspective by illustrating how foster families' own vulnerabilities, such as ill health, divorce, unemployment, or interpersonal conflict, can compromise placement stability. Such findings suggest that breakdown is not only a reflection of the child's needs but also of the foster family's resilience and the adequacy of structural support systems. Placement instability often necessitates the search for new care arrangements, further disrupting continuity and compounding the child's sense of insecurity.

Although international studies rarely differentiate between kinship and non-kinship care, South African research has addressed this question directly. Mashiloane (2016) compared related and unrelated placements, while Mnisi and Botha (2016) examined kinship placements exclusively. Both studies found no significant differences in

breakdown rates between placement types, suggesting that kinship ties do not in themselves safeguard against instability. This challenges assumptions that kinship care provides greater resilience and points to the need for consistent support across all forms of foster care.

3.7.4 THE ROLE OF THE FOSTER FAMILY IN PROVIDING CARE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE

The centrality of families in the care and development of children is widely recognised. Where biological families are unable to provide safe and nurturing environments, foster families—whether kinship or non-kinship—are considered the preferred alternative (Hepworth *et al.*, 2010). However, children in foster care require forms of caregiving that extend beyond conventional parenting, given their histories of trauma, neglect, and disrupted attachment.

3.7.4.1 TYPES OF CAREGIVING

3.7.4.1.1 SECURE BASE MODEL

Schofield and Beek (2014) propose a Secure Base Model with five caregiving dimensions that includes availability, sensitivity, acceptance, cooperation and family membership.

Caregivers play a vital role in helping foster children build trust by being consistently physically and emotionally available to meet their needs. Many foster children have previously lacked care and protection from their birth families, often facing parental frustration, anxiety, and rejection that can make it difficult for them to trust new caregivers, leading to feelings of fear and apprehension. To address this, caregivers need to use both verbal and non-verbal communication to convey their availability and create a sense of comfort for the child (Schofield & Beek, 2014). Biehal's (2014) study in the UK explored the sense of belonging among foster children and their carers. The findings revealed that foster carers who exhibited emotional commitment and fostered open communication played a crucial role in helping foster children develop a strong sense of belonging within the foster home.

Sensitivity in caregiving involves understanding a child's thoughts and feelings and communicating this understanding back to them. Children from challenging backgrounds may have lacked this emotional recognition, leaving them without support for managing feelings like panic, despair, and anger. Caregivers can help by naming, recognising, and normalising child's feelings of love, anger, longing, and distrust (Schofield & Beek, 2014). Wilson *et al.* (2003) found that when foster carers treated a foster child as a "loved child," it helped reduce their fears of rejection, anxiety, and anger while also boosting their self-esteem.

Acceptance is a key aspect of secure caregiving, involving the caregiver's ability to unconditionally value and accept the child, recognizing both their strengths and challenges. Many foster children struggle with feelings of worthlessness and low self-esteem, often stemming from a lack of warmth and acceptance from their parents and feelings of responsibility for their negative experiences. To counter this, caregivers must demonstrate that the child is valued and accepted, even when the child faces difficulties (Schofield & Beek, 2014). According to Wilson *et al.* (2003), when foster carers respond with warmth and acceptance to foster children experiencing challenges it helps the child feel more secure and valued, reducing the risk of placement breakdown.

Cooperation is a key goal in successful caregiving, where the caregiver recognizes and validates the child as an individual with wishes, feelings, and goals. Many foster children may not have experienced this cooperative style of parenting, often lacking opportunities to make choices and develop a sense of competence. Caregivers need to foster an environment that encourages competence and provides choices, allowing the child to feel effective (Schofield & Beek, 2014). In the study conducted by Wilson *et al.* (2003), the foster carer provided the foster child with both containment and security while also understanding his needs and desires. This approach helped the child feel settled in the foster home, even when exhibiting behavioral challenges.

Family membership is crucial for healthy emotional and psychosocial development. Foster carers should integrate the child into the family as a full member while also helping them maintain a connection to their birth family. This support is especially important for adolescent foster children, who face external challenges, school

pressures, and social dynamics (Schofield & Beek, 2014). In Biehal's (2014) study, foster children expressed that participating in everyday activities helped them feel like a genuine part of their foster family, contributing to their family membership, while preserving their connection to their birth family.

3.7.4.1.2 DEVELOPMENTAL RE-PARENTING

In view of the trauma that foster children experience in most of the systems in their lives, Hendry (2017) suggests that they need “developmental re-parenting”. The aim of developmental re-parenting is to provide those experiences an infant or toddler would normally have had with good parents, to children and young people who missed out on those important learning experiences. This focus is to address the developmental deficits caused by the abuse and neglect. The foster parent needs to make the link between a child’s behaviour and what the deficits may indicate. The parent needs to show empathy and consistency to the child, helping them to feel secure and recognise that they are able to depend on adults.

These models of caregiving are closely aligned with Bradshaw’s (1988, 1990) concept of healing the inner child and dealing with unresolved trauma through love and acceptance. Foster families, therefore, are not just places of protection; they also provide support that can help children heal, build self-worth, and overcome feelings of shame.

3.7.4.1.3 CARING FOR ADOLESCENTS

Fostering adolescents requires specific skills and an understanding that they have unique needs. Shuker *et al.* (2019) highlights the challenge of balancing the promotion of autonomy with maintaining appropriate control over adolescents' behaviour. Foster parents need to recognise the developmental changes in adolescents, including those stemming from adverse experiences, and respond with consistent care without withdrawing affection in response to difficult behaviour. Instead, they should encourage autonomous decision-making. Geiger *et al.* (2014) emphasises the important role of foster families in supporting adolescents, especially during their transition to adulthood. Their survey of 649 foster parents in the USA found that older foster parents and those with personal experience in care were more likely to foster

teenagers. However, barriers included concerns about safety, unpreparedness to meet adolescent needs, age dynamics with other children in the home, and reluctance due to past negative experiences.

Baer and Diehl (2019) examined motivations and barriers to fostering teenagers. Motivations included a desire to make a difference, the skills and strength to care for teenagers, and compassion for their growth. Barriers included a preference for raising younger children, negative stereotypes, and prior bad experiences with teens. The study suggested strategies to overcome these barriers, such as providing respite or short-term care opportunities and offering training for foster parents to assist them to care for teenagers.

The studies above illustrate that foster families and social work systems depend on each other. Families give children a supportive home, but training, supervision, resources, and policies decide whether foster care truly helps them heal and grow. This means strengthening caregivers and using trauma-informed practices are essential, not optional, for meeting the complex needs of foster youth.

3.8 THE ROLE OF SOCIAL WORKERS IN THE SUPERVISING FOSTER CARE PLACEMENTS

When a child enters foster care, a social worker is responsible for ensuring that all the needs of the foster child are fulfilled within a safe and loving family environment. According to DSD (2010), the social worker is also responsible for capacitating and supporting the foster parent to be able to undertake their responsibilities. The social worker is guided by the developmental approach, addressing the child's needs and capacitating them to be self-sufficient. According to Van der Westhuizen *et al.* (2012) social workers play a vital role in meeting the emotional needs of children as this will help them achieve healthy psychological development.

Within the South African context, social workers face high caseloads, limited resources, and the residual effects of the foster care crisis, which collectively shift their focus toward fulfilling children's basic needs and administrative requirements at the expense of psychosocial and developmental support (Mampane & Ross, 2017; Pretorius & Ross, 2010; Ross, 2012). This tension highlights a structural limitation,

even when social workers are committed to fostering relational and developmental support, systemic constraints impede the application of trauma-informed and child-centred practices.

3.8.1 FOSTER YOUTH'S EXPECTATIONS OF THEIR SOCIAL WORKERS

Studies by Lee-Jones (2003) and Lesea (2017) emphasizes the importance of social workers fostering meaningful relationships with foster youth and actively engaging them in conversations about their emotions. The youth expressed frustration with social workers' preoccupation on administrative tasks, which included obtaining school attendance forms and reviewing the foster care grants, rather than providing emotional support. Lesea's (2017) study also noted that foster youth felt social workers were mostly accessible only during grant reviews, leading to infrequent contact. The youth were often not honest with social workers due to a lack of follow-up and frequent changes in their caseworkers.

Similar findings were reported by Pretorius and Ross (2010), who observed that social workers prioritized administrative duties over psychosocial support for foster children and families. Studies by Mampane and Ross (2017); Schiller (2015) and Van der Westhuizen *et al.* (2012) echoed these concerns, with adolescents expressing a desire for more counselling, motivation for academic success, and group activities from their social workers.

This review has noted the difficulties that social workers face in providing services to foster youth and their families. Despite these difficulties, they have a critical responsibility to be supportive to foster families, and to help children navigate developmental challenges. Studies by Boning & Ferreira (2013) and Perumal (2011) suggest that to manage high caseloads, social workers should implement group programmes designed to the specific needs of foster youth.

Perumal and Tanga (2020) explored how social workers in Port Elizabeth, South Africa cope with their challenging roles. Strategies identified by social workers included being familiar with their caseloads, running prevention programmes to reduce statutory cases, arriving early, sometimes taking work home, maintaining relationships with every service user, and fostering positive relationships with supervisors. Beyond

administrative tasks, social workers are responsible for providing therapeutic services that can assist foster children heal from past traumas, enabling them to thrive in the future.

Foster youth clearly value meaningful relationships and consistent emotional engagement with their social workers, yet frequent caseworker changes, limited follow-up, and an emphasis on paperwork undermine trust and accessibility. This suggests a systemic gap between policy ideals and practice realities.

3.9. VOICES OF YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE

While global, regional and national instruments dictate that children have a voice on issues that affect them, Moses (2008), Jamieson (2011) and Schiller *et al.* (2023) reflect on whether this right is being fulfilled in South Africa. Jamieson (2011) asserts that most adults are reluctant to acknowledge that children have the ability to engage in issues that affect them due to cultural practices, religious beliefs, or the adult's own experiences of being excluded and not knowing how to facilitate giving effect to these rights. Similarly, Schiller *et al.* (2023) assert that children are not provided with adequate information to engage in meaningful participation. According to Abela *et al.* (2024), effectively implementing child participation requires broader cultural and societal change. This includes educating the general population on the importance of fostering meaningful conversations between adults and children.

The Children's Act, which grants children the right to participate in decisions affecting their lives, has important implications for professionals such as social workers and educators. These professionals are expected to explain what is happening, inform children about their choices, understand their feelings and preferences, and take their views seriously. By actively listening to and involving children, professionals help ensure that the child's best interests are upheld (Kruger & Coetzee, 2011). Abela *et al.* (2024) highlight the need to strengthen professionals' skills so they can create environments where children feel safe expressing their opinions. Ideally, the process of consultation with children should begin even prior to their placement, where social workers should take steps to incorporate children's perspectives in age-appropriate ways, by asking about immediate fears, needs, or feelings of safety. Doing so helps

children feel acknowledged and supported, and allows their experiences and preferences to inform subsequent decisions..

However, studies by Mampane and Ross (2017) and Lesea (2017) reveal that adolescents often rarely see their social workers, and sometimes do not even know who their social worker is. This raises concerns about whether children's voices are genuinely heard in matters affecting them. Such barriers can increase feelings of disempowerment, particularly for foster youth already grappling with stigma and toxic shame. Structural constraints, including a shortage of social workers, high caseloads, and limited time, further hinder the consistent facilitation of children's participation.

One aspect of involving children and youth in decisions that impact them is ensuring their participation in the development, implementation, and evaluation of policies and laws, helping to align these with the best interests of the child. However, there are limited opportunities to engage children and youth and it could be costly and time-consuming to build their capacities to engage meaningfully (Nomdo & Roberts, 2011). Additionally, in South Africa, cognisance must be given to the history of inequality and poverty and whether children have the opportunity to participate in important issues, especially if their basic rights are not met (Moses, 2008). However, involving children in decisions about their care can strengthen their well-being and support their development. This highlights the need to equip social workers with the skills to engage children effectively and to listen to their voices on matters that directly affect them. Creating this safe space for children's voices to be heard is essential for giving full effect to the best interests of the child principle.

3.10 CONCLUSION

This chapter has illustrated that the placement of children in foster care is shaped by legal frameworks, placement processes, and the availability and capacity of foster families, but is also fraught with challenges such as stigma, placement breakdowns, and the so-called foster care crisis in South Africa. Importantly, these placement experiences directly influence children's developmental pathways. One area where this impact is particularly pronounced is education. As the following chapter will show, the educational experiences of foster youth cannot be understood without reference to the placement stability, family support, and systemic challenges outlined here.

CHAPTER FOUR: FOSTER YOUTH AND EDUCATION

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The last two chapters examined the circumstances of children and their placement in foster care. This chapter discusses the educational experiences of foster youth, beginning with an analysis of the education system in South Africa, to provide a contextual background for understanding these experiences.

4.2 EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

4.2.1 INEQUALITY IN EDUCATION: PRE-APARTHEID

Apartheid left a legacy of entrenched inequality in South Africa, with the education system bearing some of its most lasting effects (Van der Berg, 2005). Before and during apartheid, the education system was intentionally structured to protect White interests, with policies and resources disproportionately allocated to White schools. This led to a highly segregated system in which racial groups faced distinct, unequal regulations, curricula, and funding (Adams, 2020; McKeever, 2017).

One of apartheid's most notable educational legacies was the Bantu Education Act of 1953 which enforced a lower standard of education for the Black majority (Adams, 2020; Gallo, 2020; Keswell, 2004; McKeever, 2017; Thobejane, 2013). Although Coloured and Indian learners also received a lower standard of education, this was marginally better than that of Black learners (Adams, 2020; McKeever, 2017).

A key aspect of the Bantu Education Act (1953) was the state's absolute control over Black education, dictating curricula, language of instruction, and resource allocation (Gallo, 2020; Thobejane, 2013). The lack of qualified teachers, especially in subjects like mathematics and science, deprived Black learners of the skills necessary for the labour market, limiting their socioeconomic prospects. The education system was designed to prepare them for unskilled labour rather than participation in fields that are critical to national development, such as science and technology (Adams, 2020; Gallo, 2020; Keswell, 2004; Thobejane, 2013). This failure to develop a competitive workforce contributed to declining living standards for the majority of South Africans (Thobejane, 2013; Wanka & Rena, 2019). In effect, apartheid education entrenched

intergenerational poverty among the Black majority and weakened the potential of education to act as a pathway to social mobility.

4.2.2 TRANSFORMING EDUCATION: POST-APARTHEID

4.2.2.1 LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK

The democratic transition sought to redefine education as a constitutional right and as a means of dismantling the structural inequalities inherited from apartheid. This required a comprehensive revision of the legislation governing education in the country, drawing on international instruments to inform the process. The relevant legislation is discussed briefly below.

4.2.2.1.2 SOUTH AFRICAN CONSTITUTION, 1996

Article 28 of the CRC and Article 11 of the ACRWC stipulate that all children have a right to an education that allows them to reach their fullest potential. (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner, 1989 and Organization of African Unity, 1990).

In line with this, Section 29 (1) (a) and (b) of the South African Constitution notes that “all persons have the right to basic education and to further education that the state through reasonable measures, makes available and accessible” (RSA, 1996a, p. 13). The constitutional provision transformed the South African education system as it abolished racially segregated departments of education and replaced them with a unified system aimed at promoting equity, inclusivity, and access (Mouton *et al.*, 2013).

4.2.2.1.2.THE SOUTH AFRICAN SCHOOLS ACT , 1996

The South African Schools Act was passed in 1996 and “Section 3(1) of the South African Schools Act mandates compulsory school attendance for children up to the age of 15 or until they complete the ninth grade, whichever comes first” (RSA, 1996b, p. 6). Additionally, Sections 3(5) and 3(6) requires schools to investigate and address cases where learners within the compulsory education bracket are not attending. Failure by parents to ensure their child's attendance constitutes a criminal offense, and charges may be brought against them (RSA, 1996b). These provisions reflect a

recognition by the state that enforcing school attendance is essential to realizing children's constitutional and developmental rights.

However, the implementation of compulsory attendance laws cannot be understood in isolation from the socio-economic realities affecting learners. To further promote school attendance, the DOE introduced a Policy on Learner Attendance, effective from January 1, 2011. This policy was created in response to concerns that many students were missing school due to poverty and other social challenges. It also outlines the responsibilities of schools and social services in assisting students facing difficulties such as poverty, illness, or bereavement (Mahery & Nhenga-Chakarisa, 2011). This policy shows a move away from only punishing non-attendance, toward a system that holds people accountable while also providing support, recognizing that social and economic barriers often make it hard for children to attend school.

In October 2006, the Minister of Education, Naledi Pandor, enacted regulations regarding school fee exemptions. Schools classified as no-fee schools are prevented from charging fees. While fee-paying schools are permitted to collect fees, parents who cannot afford them are legally entitled to apply for an exemption. Exemptions, which may be full, partial, or conditional, are granted on the basis of a standardized formula that assesses household income in relation to the total annual school fees (RSA, 2006). By making some schools no-fee and allowing parents who cannot afford fees to apply for exemptions, the state tries to balance the need to fund schools with children's constitutional right to education.

4.2.2.1.3 WHITE PAPER ON EDUCATION AND TRAINING, 1995

The White Paper on Education sets forth a range of principles and values aimed at addressing historical inequalities and ensuring accessibility for all to quality education, as guaranteed by the Constitution. Central to this is the equitable allocation of government resources to provide all citizens with the same high standard of educational experiences (DOE, 1995). The focus on redistribution shows that without changes in how funding is structured, the right to education would exist in theory but not in practice.

In addition, the White Paper focuses on improving the overall quality of education, particularly in schools that serve the majority population, which have seen declining performance. It emphasizes the need to strengthen teacher capacity, align the curriculum with students' needs, and enhance assessment standards and methods (DOE, 1995). By focusing on both equity and quality, the policy shows that real change means not only removing barriers to education but also improving learning outcomes.

4.2.2.2 EQUITY IN FUNDING OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS

The National Norms and Standards for School Funding were introduced to promote equity in education funding by classifying schools into five quintiles (Dieltiens & Motala, 2014; Van Dyk & White, 2019). This system ranks schools from Quintile 1 to Quintile 5 based on criteria such as unemployment rates, literacy levels, and the average income of the surrounding community. Quintile 1 schools serve the most economically disadvantaged areas, while Quintile 5 schools are located in wealthier communities. The system is designed to allocate more government funding to schools in poorer areas. Additionally, schools in Quintiles 1–3 are designated as non-fee-paying, receiving more state support, whereas Quintile 4–5 schools are fee-paying, with the assumption that parents can afford the costs, thus reducing the need for government assistance (Carrim, 2013; Havemann, 2024; Maistry & Afrika, 2020; Ogbonnaya & Awuah, 2019; Van Dyk & White, 2019).

The quintile funding system, designed to redistribute resources towards disadvantaged schools, illustrates the tension between equality of access and equality of outcomes. Spull (2019) highlights a disparity in the distribution of learners across the quintile system, noting that 85% of White students attend fee-paying schools, while 98% of learners in no-fee schools are Black or Coloured. This reflects the deep-rooted socio-economic inequalities in access to quality education, echoed by Moses *et al.* (2017), who found that most Black students continue to attend historically Black schools. Moses *et al.* (2017) differentiate between high-quality schools, which are typically former White schools with qualified teachers, strong cognitive outcomes, and active parental involvement, and low-quality schools, which are predominantly former Black schools with underqualified, unmotivated teachers and weak cognitive outcomes. By Grade 9, students in low-quality schools, attended primarily by Black

learners, lag approximately 3.5 years behind their wealthier peers, and less than a third of Grade 4 learners in these schools meet international learning benchmarks.

Havemann (2024) describes the education provided in lower quintile schools as a "poverty trap," arguing that students in these schools perform poorly from the early grades. By Grade 3, learners from Quintile 1 schools, typically in the most impoverished communities are already five grades behind students in wealthier schools. These schools, which have seen little improvement since apartheid, continue to deteriorate. Hall (2024c) further points out stark differences in grade completion rates across income levels. In 2022, only 67% of 16–17-year-olds from the poorest 20% of households had completed Grade 9, whereas 92% of their peers from the wealthiest 20% had achieved the same level of education. Hall (2024,c) attributes this disparity to the lasting effects of the racially segregated and unequally resourced education system.

Despite its aim to promote equity, the quintile system has struggled with effective implementation. Van Dyk and White (2019), for example, show that the poverty-based ranking system used to classify schools is often flawed, as it relies on community-level indicators rather than the socio-economic realities of individual learners. This mismatch creates distortions where many learners from poor households seek placement in higher quintile schools, which are perceived as offering better educational opportunities. Supporting this, Ogbonnaya and Awuah's (2019) study with 490 Grade 12 learners demonstrates that students in Quintile 4 schools consistently outperform those in Quintile 1–3 schools, highlighting that the system's redistributive design alone does not guarantee improved academic outcomes.

However, contrasting evidence suggests that structural factors within schools may be more decisive than the quintile designation itself. Du Plessis (2019) found that strong leadership, a positive school culture, and instructional focus enabled disadvantaged schools in Mpumalanga to narrow achievement gaps, particularly in mathematics. Similarly, Gibbs and Poisat (2019) illustrate how engaged and motivated educators can drive improvements in pass rates across both low- and high-quintile schools. These studies suggest that while funding formulas create a necessary framework for resource allocation, school-level practices and leadership significantly impact educational outcomes.

4.2.2.3 CURRICULUM CHANGES

Following the end of the apartheid era, a further task was to reform the education curriculum. This led to the introduction of an outcomes-based education (OBE) system, which replaced traditional subjects with broader learning areas designed to achieve various outcomes. However, OBE placed the burden on teachers to create their own learning materials, which proved especially difficult for those in under-resourced schools. Due to its lack of success, the DOE eventually issued instructional guides for teachers. This process culminated in the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), which provides clear guidelines for both teaching and assessment (Gustafsson, 2019; Muller & Hoadley, 2019; Sayed & Kanjee, 2013). While CAPS has made the curriculum more relevant, Gustafsson (2019) criticizes it for failing to offer adequate guidance on teaching early reading skills in the lower grades.

4.2.2.4. EDUCATOR KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERTISE

Havemann (2024) highlights that school funding in South Africa is divided into two main categories; teacher salaries and funding for “norms and standards.” While this structure aims to standardize provision, its impact is uneven. Because teachers and principals can choose their place of employment, well-resourced schools, typically Quintile 5, are able to attract and retain highly qualified staff. Fee-charging capacity further strengthens these schools, enabling them to employ additional teachers, have lower learner teacher ratios, and create conditions that enhance learning (Havemann, 2024; Motala & Carel, 2019). This means schools with more resources keep achieving better results.

Taylor (2019) underscores the persistence of inequalities in teacher quality between top and bottom quintile schools, particularly in critical subjects such as mathematics and English. Taylor (2019) argues that improving educational outcomes in poorer schools requires addressing both the knowledge gaps of current teachers and ensuring that new teachers are adequately trained in their subject areas. Without such interventions, redistributive funding mechanisms alone will be insufficient to disrupt the entrenched educational inequalities across South African schools.

4.2.3 SCHOOL DROP-OUT

Despite the progress that the government has made in transforming the education system, a concerning problem is the drop-out rate of learners. Many learners drop out before obtaining the National Senior Certificate (NSC), the minimum qualification achieved at the end of Grade 12 (Hartnack, 2017).

Several studies have been carried out in South Africa to examine school dropout. Sibanda (2004), using data from the 1996 South African census, examined factors contributing to school drop-out and found that household size, female headship, and living standards were determinants, particularly among Black and Coloured learners. Timæus *et al.* (2012) analysed the inequalities in school attainment in South Africa using the National Income Dynamics Study (NIDS) and similarly found that the low performance of Black learners and low matriculation rates are related to their household poverty and their mother's own limited education. This study further revealed that the educational attainment of Black children is not different from that of other children with similar backgrounds from other races. This suggests that while race in itself is no longer a constraint on how well children are educated, poverty continues to impact educational attainment. Similarly, Mokoena and Van Breda (2021) found a link between poverty and female learners dropping out of school. For instance, pregnant learners were unable to afford the cost of a doctor's note, which was required for their return to school, or secure childcare, further hindering their ability to continue their education. Ntuli *et al.* (2020), also found that poverty, frequent hunger and unfair treatment by family members contributed to school dropout among maternal orphans.

A study by Mgwangqa and Lawrence (2008), in the Eastern Cape with learners, educators and parents, identified poverty, HIV, poor school conditions, and inadequate resources as key reasons for early secondary school drop-outs. Similarly, Branson *et al.* (2014), analysed the NIDS data to investigate the progress of learners and examine the determinants of dropout in South Africa. They found that dropping out was closely linked to socio-economic status and school quality. The study also revealed that falling behind academically is a predictor of dropping out, with learners in better-resourced schools less likely to drop out, while those attending under-resourced schools struggled to stay on track. Similar to the study by Branson *et al.* (2014), Mlamla's

(2008) study with adolescents revealed they leave school because they do not cope with their lessons. Many of them progressed to the next grade without having a basic foundation because of their age.

Desai *et al.* (2024) conducted interviews with 41 youth in Cape Town to explore their reasons for dropping out of school. They found poor academic performance, social issues like peer pressure and bullying, and lack of family support to be key factors. The study also reveals gender differences with males more likely to drop out due to academic and social issues, while females often left school due to family-related reasons, such as pregnancy. An earlier study in South Africa by Hunter and May (2011) similarly revealed that female adolescents are more vulnerable to dropping out, mostly because of pregnancy.

Although access to education in South Africa has improved, many learners still drop out before finishing school. The studies show that poverty is the main reason, as it affects family resources, health, and the ability to manage challenges like pregnancy or losing a parent. School factors, such as poor teaching, lack of resources, and learners falling behind, also play a big role. Girls are especially at risk because of pregnancy and caregiving responsibilities. Overall, dropping out happens because of a mix of social, economic, and school-related problems. To reduce dropout, efforts must focus not only on access but also on supporting vulnerable learners and improving school quality.

4.2.4 IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION AND REDUCING DROP-OUT RATES

Despite extensive policy reform, the South African education system continues to reproduce rather than dismantle structural inequality. The persistence of poor-quality education, particularly in historically disadvantaged communities, entrenches socio-economic disparities by constraining children's capabilities to participate meaningfully in education and, by extension, in the labour market (Hendricks & Thengela, 2020; Hunter & May, 2011; Moses *et al.*, 2017; Wanka & Rena, 2019). As Spaul (2015) argues, educational quality is the key determinant of future employment and earning potential, not merely formal attainment. Learners from poorly resourced schools frequently achieve lower earnings than their counterparts from stronger schools, even

when both complete the same grade level. Thus, quality functions as the hidden mechanism that sustains intergenerational poverty, revealing that equal access to schooling does not translate into equal outcomes.

Thus, the link between a quality education and improving the circumstances of the most of the South Africans dictates the need for an urgent response to improve education standards and reducing drop-out rates. Improving access to early childhood development is crucial to addressing educational inequality (Crouch, 2005; Hartnack, 2017; Spaul, 2015; Van der Berg *et al.*, 2011). Spaul (2015) advocates for a national literacy campaign that focuses on early childhood development, emphasizing that without foundational numeracy and literacy skills, learners will struggle with the curriculum in higher grades and fall behind. Similarly, Crouch (2005) and Pillay (2018) propose that interventions must begin in the earliest grades, prioritizing literacy and numeracy to make sure that all children can read proficiently as these are key to keeping children on track and preventing them from falling behind in school.

Based on his study, Gustafsson (2011) proposes boosting the quality of secondary education by improving access to learning materials and focusing on reading and writing skills. Schools should also concentrate on providing more vocationally oriented education for youth in poorer communities. Similarly, Desai *et al.* (2024) advocate expanding learning and employment opportunities for vocational students.

Systemic interventions to prevent dropouts include implementing early warning tracking systems to monitor key indicators like attendance, grade retention, academic performance, and social engagement (Desai *et al.*, 2024; Hartnack, 2017). Limiting grade retention, a known contributor to early school leaving, is also critical. The DOE issued a directive restricting schools from holding back struggling learners for more than one year within a three-year phase (Hartnack, 2017).

There is also a pressing need to re-engage and reintegrate learners who have dropped out (Hartnack, 2017), focusing on second-chance programmes that help students complete their matric (Moses *et al.*, 2017). This is also in line with the National Youth Policy 2020-2030 that prioritizes second-chance learning (RSA, 2020b). Spaul (2015) notes the importance of addressing the learning backlog many students face by high school, citing the Ikamva Youth programme, a one-on-one tutoring initiative piloted in

10 South African townships that has successfully helped youth transition to tertiary education. To support struggling learners, academic interventions such as group tutoring, after-school programmes, homework assistance, and catch-up programmes are essential. These measures can provide the additional support needed to keep learners on track and reduce dropout rates (Hartnack, 2017).

Crouch (2005), Spaul (2015) and Van der Berg *et al.* (2011) emphasize the need to enhance teacher knowledge, teaching skills, and curriculum relevance. Teachers must be equipped with the expertise to effectively teach their subjects, particularly in areas like mathematics and English, where gaps exist.

According to Hartnack (2017), the curriculum must be relevant to the career prospects of learners from disadvantaged communities and culturally responsive. Additionally, improving school infrastructure, fostering a supportive learning environment, building positive teacher-student relationships, and cultivating strong school leadership are crucial to educational progress (Desai *et al.*, 2024; Hartnack, 2017).

At a programmatic level, there should be a strong emphasis on psychosocial support, including targeted interventions such as home visits, referrals to social services, counselling, and group work. Developing social and life skills in the learners, such as communication, problem-solving, conflict resolution, and peer resistance, is equally important. School counselling services should address high-risk behaviours like bullying, aggression, disruption, substance abuse, and risky sexual behaviour. Family intervention services are also crucial to improving family environments and parenting skills (Hartnack, 2017; Ntuli *et al.*, 2020). Maarman and Lamont-Mbawuli (2017) also proposes a multidisciplinary team to address the diverse social problems of learners.

The South African education system continues to experience challenges, as access alone does not guarantee quality outcomes. Early interventions, strong literacy and numeracy foundations, and improved teacher capacity are essential to keep learners on track and reduce dropouts. Second-chance programmes, vocational opportunities, and targeted academic support can help re-engage learners and address learning backlogs. Psychosocial support, family engagement, and a culturally relevant curriculum are also crucial for creating environments that foster success. Overall,

improving education requires a holistic approach that addresses both school quality and the broader social and economic challenges learners face.

4.2.5 PROGRESS TO TERTIARY EDUCATION

Post-apartheid, South Africa's higher education system also required transformation. One key reform was the introduction of the South African Qualifications Act, which established the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), overseen by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). The NQF was designed to standardize and ensure the quality of qualifications across universities, vocational institutions, and work-based training programmes. Alongside the NQF, Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) was also introduced as part of these reforms (Boughey, 2003).

A key element of tertiary education reform in South Africa involved merging of various institutions across the country (Kaburise, 2014; Mouton *et al.*, 2013). These institutions were consolidated into three categories: traditional universities, which offer undergraduate and postgraduate degrees; universities of technology, which focus on vocational training and offer certificates, diplomas, and degrees; and comprehensive universities, which provide both academic and vocational programmes. Additionally, Further Education and Training (FET) Colleges were established to improve access to education. While these mergers were seen as necessary, Mouton *et al.* (2013) found that challenges exist in maintaining both academic standards and socio-economic equity in the process.

The state has made tremendous efforts to improve access to tertiary education for disadvantaged learners through the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). Under this scheme, students whose parents earn less than R350,000 per year are eligible for financial support (Hendricks & Thengela, 2020).

A study by Maila and Ross (2018), involving matriculants from a rural South African community, explored the factors that facilitated and hindered their transition to tertiary education. The study revealed that although participants recognized the importance of education, barriers such as language challenges, lack of funding, under-resourced schools, and insufficient career guidance limited their ability to pursue higher education. Similarly, Moses *et al.* (2017) note that although progress has been made

in reallocating resources from formerly white schools to historically black schools and increasing educational attainment, the system still only enables a small portion of Black learners to progress to tertiary education.

Post-apartheid reforms have expanded access and standardized qualifications in South Africa's higher education system. However, despite initiatives like institutional mergers and financial support through NSFAS, barriers such as under-resourced schools, language challenges, and limited career guidance continue to restrict many disadvantaged learners from successfully entering and completing tertiary education. Ensuring both equity and quality remains an ongoing challenge.

4.3 FOSTER YOUTH AND EDUCATION

Children and youth in foster care have high educational aspirations and view education as the pathway to financial success and improving their lives (Courtney *et al.*, 2004; Gerber & Dicker, 2006; Siyawareva, 2019). However, they face many challenges and are prone to risks that prevent them from doing well at school. They perform lower academically than their peers outside of foster care, have higher absenteeism rates, need special education support and face traumatic life events. This may result in them not graduating from school and attending higher education institutions (Clemens *et al.*, 2016; Johnson *et al.*, 2020; Morton, 2015a; Moyer & Goldberg, 2020; Palmieri & La Salle, 2016; Zetlin *et al.*, 2004). Mohamed (2012) conducted a study in Cape Town that compared the educational outcomes of foster children and children living with their biological parents. The study revealed that foster children, particularly double orphans, have a lower grade attainment than children who live with both their parents.

Various factors promote or impede the educational outcomes of foster children and youth and these are examined below.

4.3.1. FACTORS THAT PROMOTE POSITIVE EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES FOR FOSTER YOUTH

4.3.1.1 LEGISLATION AND POLICIES

South Africa has made tremendous progress in complying with international instruments in promoting education for foster youth. The Children's Act that protects

children and the FCS makes provisions for foster youth who are over eighteen to remain in foster care, as long as they are still schooling or attending a tertiary institution. This order is renewed annually until the youth is twenty-one years and still at school or attending tertiary institutions (RSA, 2005). This enables the foster parent to receive the foster care grant that enables the foster youth to matriculate and proceed to tertiary education (RSA, 2004) opening up more opportunities for them.

The regulations regarding school fee exemptions in public schools provide automatic exemptions for foster children, children in CYCCs, recipients of social grants, and children from child-headed households (RSA, 2006). Additionally, as noted earlier, the government has improved access to tertiary education through the NSFAS programme.

These initiatives by the government are encouraging steps toward helping foster youth achieve better educational outcomes. However, as highlighted earlier, the broader challenges within the education system demonstrate the need for further, long-term reforms.

4.3.1.2 PLACEMENT IN FOSTER CARE

Although many foster youth face educational challenges, foster care does not constitute a single story. Dhludhlu (2021) observed in a study in Gauteng, South Africa, involving 18 social workers and 18 foster youth, that foster care facilitated participation in recreational and extracurricular activities, fostering a sense of belonging and social integration. Furthermore, foster care often enhanced access to educational opportunities, enabling youth to complete their schooling and improve their prospects for gainful employment. The ability of foster parents to utilize the FCG also played a crucial role in meeting both the basic and educational needs of foster youth (Dhludhlu & Lombard, 2017; Tladi & Setlalentoa, 2020).

Comparative evidence from the United States reinforces these findings. Font and Maguire-Jack (2013) found that children placed in foster care exhibited higher levels of cognitive and emotional engagement in school than their peers who remained at home despite being at risk. This suggests that removal from potentially adverse home environments, when coupled with supportive foster care, can enhance educational

engagement rather than hinder it. Similarly, Sinclair *et al.* (2019) reported that foster youth in the UK experienced increased feelings of safety and stability in care, conditions that were positively associated with improved schooling outcomes.

Thus foster care, when structured to provide stability, resources, and social support, can function as a protective and promotive factor for educational attainment.

4.3.1.3 SUPPORTIVE FOSTER PARENTS

Chapter 3 highlighted the pivotal role of foster parents in shaping the developmental outcomes of foster youth. Foster parents contribute significantly to helping foster youth achieve positive educational outcomes. For instance, Skilbred *et al.* (2016) in Norway, studying 13 foster parents and 16 former foster youth, found that the full inclusion of youth within the foster home fostered a sense of belonging, while sustained emotional and financial support, even after youth exited care, reinforced educational continuity. Similarly, Strolin-Goltzman *et al.* (2016) reported that the dedication and active investment of foster parents in their foster youth's education encouraged them to prioritize schooling, suggesting that the quality of relational and practical support directly influences academic motivation.

South African studies corroborate these findings in a local context. Schiller (2015) observed that foster parents actively supported adolescents' academic achievements, while Perumal (2011) highlighted the commitment of grandmothers to their foster grandchildren's schooling, despite age-related and financial constraints. These patterns align with Emerson and Lovitt's (2003) findings in the USA, which emphasize that, notwithstanding challenges such as limited educational backgrounds or advanced age, foster parents remain central to fostering positive educational outcomes. These studies suggest that the educational pathways of foster youth are not solely determined by systemic or structural factors; rather, they are significantly shaped by the relational quality, commitment, and resourcefulness of foster parents, underscoring the importance of supportive home environments in promoting academic success.

4.3.1.4 EDUCATION SYSTEM

The education system plays a vital role in promoting educational success among foster youth. Studies indicate that schools provide foster youth with both emotional and practical support that fosters academic engagement and personal development. Dhludhlu (2021) observed that foster youth in South Africa perceived schools as a coping mechanism, recognizing education as a key pathway to navigating life after foster care and achieving personal goals such as completing Grade 12.

Similarly, international studies have revealed that the education system plays a significant role in enhancing the academic outcomes of foster youth. Schroeter *et al.* (2015) found that foster youth benefited from emotional support and self-regulation skills within the school setting, as well as access to after-school programmes, sports, tutoring, financial assistance for college, and guidance with college applications. Neal (2017) highlighted the critical role of school-based extracurricular programmes in fostering both academic success and personal growth, emphasizing that a positive academic environment combined with high teacher expectations motivated foster youth to pursue higher aspirations. Mihalec-Adkins and Cooley (2020) further demonstrated that school engagement, self-esteem, and social skills functioned as protective factors, with engaged foster youth exhibiting fewer behavioural problems, higher self-esteem, and improved social skills. McGuire *et al.* (2021) emphasized that among various sources of support, teacher involvement was particularly influential in shaping academic performance and behavioural health. Additional studies by Heyman *et al.* (2020), Johnson *et al.* (2020) and Strolin-Goltzman *et al.* (2016) reinforce that encouragement, guidance, and mentoring from educators and coaches are significant contributors to positive educational outcomes.

Moreover, the literature underscores the need for a trauma-informed approach in schools, as foster youth may exhibit behaviours shaped by prior adversity that could otherwise be misinterpreted as deviant or problematic (Clemens *et al.*, 2017; Moyer & Goldberg, 2020). Effective educational support also requires collaboration between schools and the child welfare system to ensure stability and continuity in learning. Zetlin *et al.* (2004) argue that educational specialists must work alongside social workers to address systemic barriers, highlighting that the educational trajectories of

foster youth are contingent on coordinated, multi-level support rather than the efforts of isolated institutions.

These findings suggest that schools function not only as academic institutions but also as protective and promotive environments, where relational support, structured opportunities, and trauma-informed practices converge to enhance foster youth's educational outcomes.

4.3.1.5 PEER SUPPORT

Peers and friends constitute an important socializing influence during adolescence, a developmental stage characterized by increasing autonomy from adult authority and a growing reliance on peer networks for affirmation and support. The quality of these relationships has been shown to influence identity formation, self-concept, and the capacity to build and sustain future intimate relationships. Importantly, peer support extends beyond emotional reassurance to tangible developmental outcomes, including enhanced coping skills and improved academic performance (Berk, 2018; Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2015).

Within the context of foster care, peer support acquires heightened significance, given the instability, loss, and relational disruptions that many foster youth experience. Studies have highlighted the protective nature of peer relationships. McGuire *et al.* (2021) and Strolin-Goltzman *et al.* (2016) demonstrated that supportive connections with classmates and peers foster greater engagement in education and positively influence academic achievement. Heyman *et al.* (2020), in their study of 29 foster youth, further emphasized that relationships with peers who also had foster care experiences provided a distinct form of empathy and understanding. This type of peer support allowed youth to navigate shared challenges more effectively, reducing feelings of isolation.

4.3.1.6 THE SOCIAL WORKER'S ROLE

The role of social workers extends beyond ensuring the safety of the child and case management to actively shaping the educational outcomes of foster youth. Social workers occupy a pivotal position in bridging the gap between the child welfare system

and the education sector. Zetlin *et al.* (2005) highlight the importance of social workers in enhancing educational outcomes by ensuring that the unique needs of foster children are recognized and addressed. Their findings emphasize that collaborative engagement between schools and social workers facilitates timely interventions, particularly in cases where foster youth experience placement disruptions, academic difficulties, or emotional challenges. Similarly, Stanley (2012) and Stone *et al.* (2006) argue that such collaboration is extremely beneficial, as foster youth frequently face instability and require immediate, coordinated responses to maintain educational continuity.

Lesea's (2017) study revealed that although participants experienced limited access to their social workers; when contact occurred, the encouragement provided was meaningful. Social workers' motivational support not only reinforced the importance of completing secondary education but also helped foster youth envision future opportunities beyond the care system. Strolin-Goltzman *et al.* (2016) further demonstrated that emotional support from social workers enhanced school engagement, thereby strengthening academic performance. These findings suggest that even brief but purposeful interactions with social workers can exert a significant positive influence on educational outcomes.

4.3.1.7 RESILIENCE AND ASPIRATIONS

Resilience has emerged as an important concept in understanding how foster youth navigate adversity and achieve positive outcomes despite significant challenges. Hepworth *et al.* (2010) and Smith (2011) describe resilience as the capacity to thrive in difficult circumstances, while Van Breda (2018, p. 4) extends this definition to "the multilevel processes that systems engage in to obtain better-than-expected outcomes in the face or wake of adversity." This definition underscores that resilience is not an isolated individual trait but a dynamic process that occurs across multiple systems, individual, relational, community, and societal. Smith (2011) further highlights the necessity of considering both personal and environmental protective and risk factors when evaluating resilience in youth, positioning resilience as a multidimensional and context-dependent phenomenon.

Studies illustrate how relational and personal resources contribute to resilience among foster youth. Strolin-Goltzman *et al.* (2016) found that supportive relationships with adult mentors and peers enhanced foster youths' capacity to succeed academically and progress to higher education. Similarly, Van Breda and Theron (2018) identified affective support and close relationships as critical relational resources strengthening resilience among South African children and youth. Dumont *et al.* (2022), in their study with adolescent girls in care, revealed that participants emphasized overcoming hardships and prioritizing stability and control in their future lives, highlighting resilience as both a psychological and aspirational process. Shpiegel's (2016) study of older foster youth further demonstrated that despite adversity, many were able to function effectively within educational settings, pointing to resilience as a protective factor for academic success.

In addition to relational support, intrinsic characteristics and aspirations are central to resilience. Neal's (2017) study in the United States showed that foster youth who transitioned to tertiary education exhibited traits such as intelligence, goal orientation, and high academic aspirations. Importantly, these youth reframed their past adversities as sources of motivation rather than barriers, using negative experiences as a catalyst for achievement. This finding resonates with Dumont *et al.* (2022), where youth articulated a desire to transcend their circumstances and exercise agency over their futures. Parallel trends have been observed in South Africa. Studies by Dhludlu (2021), Lesea (2017), and Moodley (2020) all demonstrate that foster youth exhibit resilience by overcoming challenges and focusing on improving their future prospects. Similarly, Perumal (2011), Schiller (2015), and Siyawareva (2019) highlighted the prevalence of high educational aspirations and determination to succeed among South African foster youth, despite systemic barriers.

Van Breda's (2017) large-scale study across seven sites in South Africa revealed unexpected findings, children in one child and youth care centre (CYCC) and one impoverished community demonstrated the highest levels of resilience, surpassing even youth in more advantaged suburban schools. These findings point to the significant role of caregivers, families, and communities in nurturing resilience, reinforcing the notion that resilience is co-constructed through interactions across multiple systems.

Positive educational outcomes for foster youth arise from the combined influence of supportive policies, stable foster placements, engaged caregivers, and responsive schools. Peer support, social workers, and resilience further enhance their ability to succeed academically. This highlights that fostering educational success requires coordinated efforts across families, schools, and social systems to provide holistic support for foster youth.

4.3.2 BARRIERS TO FOSTER YOUTH ACHIEVING POSITIVE EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

Foster youth face numerous challenges that can hinder their educational success, including pre-placement trauma, emotional and behavioural difficulties, the quality of care in their foster homes, and systemic issues within both the school and foster care systems.

4.3.2.1 PRE-PLACEMENT TRAUMA, EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIOURAL FACTORS AND PEER PRESSURE

4.3.2.1.1 PRE-PLACEMENT TRAUMA

Before entering the FCS, many children have already been exposed to significant trauma and maltreatment, which profoundly shapes their developmental and educational trajectories (Clemens *et al.*, 2017; Mitchell, 2018; Ruff *et al.*, 2019). Such adverse experiences are strongly associated with clinical diagnoses, including ADHD, conduct disorders, and attachment-related difficulties, all of which compromise concentration, behavioural regulation, and the capacity to engage meaningfully in learning environments. Clemens *et al.* (2017), in a study with former foster youth in the USA, highlight how these challenges foster feelings of isolation and marginalisation, ultimately undermining school engagement. The inability to form secure, trusting relationships with teachers further exacerbates this disconnection (Palmieri & La Salle, 2016; Steenbakkens *et al.*, 2019).

Research from both the USA and the Netherlands underscores the cumulative educational disadvantages foster youth face even before formal placement (Courtney *et al.*, 2004; Steenbakkens *et al.*, 2019). Many children enter school late, lag behind in

reading, and are frequently older than their peers in the same grade. Krier *et al.* (2018) attributes such delays to the enduring effects of abuse and neglect, which often manifest in learning difficulties, special educational needs, and language impairments that compromise literacy acquisition. Beyond academics, these deficits spill over into socio-emotional functioning, limiting social competence and peer integration. Consequently, children may struggle to sustain friendships, display aggressive behaviours, or withdraw into isolation. Similarly, Palmieri and La Salle (2016) assert that foster children who have been victims of parental neglect show signs of impairment in social skills and self-control and may present in school as detached, apathetic, sometimes overly sociable, disruptive, defiant or even anti-social. These factors will impact academic performance.

These studies illustrate how pre-placement trauma sets in motion a web of interrelated academic and social challenges. Educational delays, behavioural difficulties, and strained relationships are not isolated problems but mutually reinforcing outcomes of early adversity, which place foster youth at a heightened risk of persistent academic underperformance and reduced long-term educational attainment.

4.3.2.1.2 EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIOURAL FACTORS

In the South African context, the HIV/AIDS epidemic has been a major driver of the increasing number of orphans requiring foster care, with profound implications for their psychosocial and educational trajectories. Research consistently documents the intense emotional burden associated with parental loss. Studies by Mampane and Ross (2017), Pretorius and Ross (2010), and Van der Westhuizen *et al.* (2012) emphasise the deep grief and emotional pain foster youth experience, while Ntuli *et al.* (2020) highlights how the loss of mothers in particular destabilises orphans' psychosocial well-being, which in turn negatively influences school performance and increases the risk of early school leaving. These findings underscore the ways in which bereavement not only disrupts emotional stability but also shapes educational engagement and attainment.

Beyond the emotional impact of loss, foster youth frequently present with behavioural challenges that create additional barriers to academic success. These include difficulties in adhering to rules, poor impulse control, heightened frustration, and

behaviours that lead to frequent disciplinary interventions or even expulsion from school (Palmieri & La Salle, 2016). Aggressive, attention-seeking, and disruptive behaviours have also been linked to grade repetition and academic stagnation (Gerber & Dicker, 2006; Zetlin *et al.*, 2004). South African research by Mlamla (2008), drawing on interviews with adolescent foster youth, their caregivers, and educators, reveals that these behavioural difficulties often escalate into more severe outcomes such as substance abuse, early sexual activity, and engagement in deviant or criminal behaviour. Such trajectories significantly undermine educational continuity and contribute to school dropout.

The studies above show the compounding effect of emotional and behavioural challenges in shaping the educational experiences of foster youth. Loss and grief undermine psychosocial well-being, while behavioural manifestations of trauma disrupt classroom participation and relationships with teachers and peers placing foster youth at heightened risk of academic underachievement and premature school exit.

4.3.2.1.3 PEER PRESSURE

Friends and peers can also exert a negative influence on those trying to fit in (Berk, 2018; Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2015). According to Mlamla (2008) and Zetlin, *et al.* (2004), peer pressure is a further factor that contributes to foster youth dropping out of school.

4.3.2.2. MALTREATMENT IN THE FOSTER HOME

The foster home is intended to provide safety and stability for children removed from situations of abuse, neglect, and abandonment. Yet evidence shows that foster care placements do not always fulfil this protective function and, in some cases, expose children to further harm. Such adverse experiences within the foster home undermine the developmental and educational prospects of foster youth, rather than supporting recovery and growth. Research conducted internationally has documented the prevalence and consequences of maltreatment within foster care placements. The Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study (Pecora *et al.*, 2010) revealed that experiences of abuse in foster homes had long-term repercussions, affecting not only educational

outcomes but also employment opportunities, financial stability, and the quality of social relationships in adulthood. Similarly, Kantor *et al.* (2022), Landers *et al.* (2021), and Morton (2015b) emphasise the persistent occurrence of maltreatment within foster placements and its negative impact on educational trajectories.

South African studies confirm these patterns, showing that abuse and neglect also occur within foster homes. Mnisi and Botha (2016) found that many foster youth reported experiences of both physical and emotional abuse by foster parents. Siyawareva's (2019) study of foster youth in Cape Town further revealed that verbal and physical abuse, often associated with foster parents' alcohol use, disrupted educational progress and diminished school engagement. Complementing these accounts, Masha and Botha (2021) reported that social workers themselves acknowledged the occurrence of maltreatment in foster placements, attributing it in part to systemic challenges such as excessive caseloads and resource shortages, which limit the capacity to adequately monitor and supervise foster homes. These findings highlight the paradox that foster care, while designed as a protective intervention, can reproduce cycles of trauma and disadvantage when placements are unsafe.

4.3.2.3 CHALLENGES FACED BY FOSTER PARENTS

Studies have shown that foster parents' limited educational backgrounds and socioeconomic constraints can significantly hinder the academic progress of foster youth. Emerson and Lovitt (2003) argue that poor academic outcomes may partly be explained by foster parents' inability to provide the educational guidance and support children require. Schiller (2015) similarly found that adolescents often perceived a generational gap and low levels of education among foster parents as barriers to receiving academic help, reinforcing the challenges foster youth face in navigating schoolwork without adequate support at home.

Beyond academic assistance, broader aspects of foster parenting also influence educational outcomes. Mlamla's (2008) study revealed that some foster parents failed to provide consistent care, love, and encouragement, which foster youth identified as a key factor contributing to school dropout. Neglect in the form of not providing food, uniforms, or other necessities discouraged school attendance, while the expectation

that foster youth assume caregiving responsibilities for siblings created additional strain and further increased dropout risks. These findings echo Gerber and Dicker's (2006) conclusion that insufficient foster parent support is a major contributor to poor educational performance. Lesea (2017) adds that financial constraints, particularly the inability to afford transportation or supplementary academic resources such as extra classes, further restrict foster youths' educational opportunities.

4.3.2.4 PLACEMENT INSTABILITY AND SCHOOL MOBILITY

Placement instability and school mobility represent significant barriers to the educational success of foster youth. As discussed in the previous chapter, multiple factors contribute to placement disruptions, including maltreatment within the foster home, stressors in the foster family, and difficulties in managing behavioural challenges (Koh *et al.*, 2014). Similarly, Mashiloane's (2016) South African study confirms that behavioural difficulties among foster youth often trigger placement changes, thereby undermining the stability that foster care is intended to provide. Instead of functioning as a stable and supportive environment, placements that break down repeatedly expose children to uncertainty and disconnection, which in turn disrupts their educational engagement.

Closely linked to placement instability is the problem of school mobility. When foster youth are moved between placements, educational continuity is often overlooked. Gerber and Dicker (2006) note that children are sometimes transferred without adequate consideration of their schooling needs, leading to abrupt removals from one school and delayed enrolment in another. Such disruptions result in extended school absences and lost learning opportunities. Administrative inefficiencies, such as delayed or missing transfer of school records, further exacerbate these challenges, particularly for children requiring special educational services (Courtney *et al.*, 2004; Gerber & Dicker, 2006; Emerson & Lovitt, 2003; Lips, 2007; Morton, 2015a; Palmieri & La Salle, 2016).

The cumulative effects of school mobility extend beyond academic disruption. Emerson and Lovitt (2003) emphasise that frequent school moves limit foster youths' participation in extracurricular activities, which play a critical role in fostering social skills, peer relationships, and school connectedness. Without these opportunities,

foster youth are deprived of protective factors that can encourage persistence in education. Clemens *et al.* (2016), in a large-scale study of 3,357 foster youth in the USA, found that school mobility significantly reduced the likelihood of obtaining a high school diploma. School changes not only created academic gaps but also disrupted peer relationships, diminishing both engagement and motivation. Further studies highlight the importance of involving foster youth in decisions about placement and school changes, as lack of consultation can compound feelings of instability and alienation, further jeopardising educational outcomes (Chambers *et al.*, 2017; Chambers *et al.*, 2020; Schroeter *et al.*, 2015).

The above show that placement instability and school mobility are closely connected and together weaken the education of foster youth. Every time a placement breaks down, it disrupts schooling, causing absences, delays in support, loss of friendships, and lower motivation to learn.

4.3.2.5 THE SCHOOL SYSTEM AND ENVIRONMENT

As outlined earlier, South Africa's education system faces systemic challenges in delivering quality education to all learners, and these shortcomings are particularly pronounced for foster youth, who must navigate the dual burden of structural inequities and the complexities of life in care. Research highlights critical gaps in the education system's ability to support foster children effectively. Dhludhlu and Lombard's (2017) study with statutory social workers in Gauteng found that foster youth were not referred timeously for educational psychological assessments and that limited resources restricted access to specialised interventions. Children presenting with behavioural difficulties were also not referred to social workers, signalling a breakdown in intersectoral collaboration. Complementing these findings, Siyawareva (2019) revealed that educators themselves often lacked commitment to supporting foster youth in achieving their educational goals, further undermining their chances of success.

International literature reinforces these patterns, showing that the special educational needs of foster youth are frequently overlooked, particularly in contexts of placement instability and school mobility (Emerson & Lovitt, 2003; Morton, 2015a). Moyer and Goldberg (2020) further emphasise the barriers foster parents face in accessing

appropriate services, noting strained relationships with educators who fail to recognise or respect their parental role. These systemic obstacles restrict both the resources available to foster youth and the support networks critical for navigating educational challenges.

Teacher attitudes also emerge as a significant determinant of foster youth's educational trajectories. Emerson and Lovitt (2003) and Moyer and Goldberg (2020) found that educators were often insensitive to the unique circumstances of foster youth, offering limited encouragement and maintaining low academic expectations. Such attitudes foster exclusion rather than integration, reinforcing educational marginalisation. Moyer and Goldberg's (2020) study revealed that many foster youth, though motivated to succeed, de-prioritised school as they grappled with trauma and instability. Clemens *et al.* (2017) similarly documented how external responsibilities, such as sibling care and fears of homelessness, competed with academic demands, further constraining educational attainment.

Collectively the studies highlight that systemic gaps in the education system, insufficient intersectoral collaboration, limited resources, and negative teacher attitudes converge to disadvantage foster youth. Rather than serving as a pathway to opportunity, schools often reproduce the instability and marginalisation that foster youth experience in their broader lives, making sustained academic success especially difficult to achieve.

4.3.2.6 THE SOCIAL WORKER AND THE FOSTER CARE SYSTEM

The FCS and the social worker have an integral role in supporting foster youth to achieve positive educational outcomes. However, these may be barriers to foster youth achieving educational success.

Courtney *et al.* (2004) report that caseworkers in the USA face several challenges in helping the foster child receive a high-quality education. This includes carrying a high caseload (approximately 14 children) who go to different schools, preventing the caseworkers from forming relationships with the schools. Staff turnover and case reassignment add to the challenges faced by the caseworkers.

In Morton's (2015a) study, the FCS was identified as a barrier to academic achievement, largely due to a pervasive lack of trust in caseworkers, foster parents, and society as a whole. The youth felt disempowered and powerless, from not having a say in their placements or any changes related to their living situations. Heyman *et al.* (2020) also found that youth lacked trust in the adults in their lives and in the overall FCS, and youth in the study by Steenbakkens *et al.* (2018), expressed feelings of anger about their circumstances and the lack of control they experienced while in care.

This review examined the role of social workers within the South African context, highlighting the foster care crisis, high caseloads and bureaucracy as barriers to providing services to foster youth and their families. Nevertheless, social workers have the potential to play a crucial role in helping foster youth achieve positive educational outcomes.

Pretorius (2020) recommends that in view of the various social problems that all learners experience, there should be a collaboration between the social workers, educators and other professionals to address the difficulties in an integrated manner. This collaborative and integrated approach will contribute to the development of all learners to become well-adjusted and productive citizens. Vergottini and Weyers (2020) also support the need for social workers to be placed at schools in view of the complex challenges faced by learners that impact their learning, such as poverty, exposure to violence and alcohol and drug abuse, leaving school and emotional and behavioural problems presented by the learners. A study by Sathiparsad and Taylor (2005) in KwaZulu-Natal revealed educators' support of social work interventions and the placement of social workers in schools. Educators and social workers working together can remove barriers and better support foster youth to achieve positive educational outcomes.

4.4 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, foster youth's education is shaped by their experiences in both the foster care and education systems, which often create barriers to learning. For South African foster youth, these challenges are made worse by poverty, limited resources, and systemic inequality, showing the need for deep systemic change. Supportive foster

parents, access to resources, and resilience can help, while trauma, instability, and structural barriers limit opportunities. Education reflects these early experiences and placement conditions, and improving outcomes requires stronger collaboration between social workers and schools to support foster youth's transition into adulthood which is the focus of the next chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE: YOUTH TRANSITIONING OUT OF FOSTER CARE

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores the experiences of foster youth as they navigate the transition from care to independent adulthood. Within the literature, various terms are used to describe young people leaving care, including *foster care alumni* (Olson et al., 2017; Watt et al., 2019), *emerging adults* (Gomez et al., 2015), and *care-leavers* (Dhludhlu, 2024; Van Breda, 2024a). These terms are used interchangeably in this chapter. The discussion considers the South African legislative framework, the developmental tasks of emerging adulthood, and the extent to which foster youth are prepared, or not prepared, for life after care.

5.2 SOUTH AFRICAN LEGISLATION AND GUIDELINES FOR YOUTH TRANSITIONING OUT OF FOSTER CARE

In South Africa, Section 175 of the Children's Act 38 of 2005 stipulates that foster youth are discharged at the age of 18 if they are not reunified with their biological families. Exceptions are made for those still pursuing education, allowing them to remain in care until the age of 21. This provision is significant, as it places pressure on young people to complete their secondary and post-secondary education within this limited timeframe, a demand that appears unrealistic given the cumulative educational challenges outlined in Chapter Four. Moreover, challenges may arise where foster parents are unwilling to extend the placement beyond 18 years, creating additional instability for the young person. At 21 years, youth are no longer legally protected under the Act, and are assumed to be capable of independent living (RSA, 2005).

While Section 191(3)(e) of the Act mandates that children in residential facilities should be prepared for discharge at 18, the legislation is silent on aftercare services and on the preparation of foster youth specifically (Shaw, 2019; UNICEF ESARO, 2021). The Guidelines for the Effective Management of Foster Care in South Africa (DSD, 2010) and the Information Guide on the Management of Statutory Services (DSD, 2012) attempt to address this gap, recommending that care and permanency plans be

reviewed once foster youth turn 15 years, and that they be included in independent living programmes prior to discharge.

However, Van Breda (2024b) observes that DSD does not provide dedicated funding for aftercare services, despite being mandated to deliver social welfare support. He further notes that although guidelines for independent living programmes were drafted in 2019, they remain unpublished and impractical for implementation. This absence of clear, accessible, and enforceable guidelines highlights a systemic weakness; while policy frameworks recognise the need for preparation, practical interventions remain largely absent. Additionally, there is a need for adequate resources, both financial and human, to enable social workers and child and youth care workers to effectively prepare youth for independent living.

5.3 EMERGING ADULTHOOD

Arnett (2000, p. 469) defines emerging adulthood as the developmental stage spanning the late teens through to the mid-twenties (approximately 18–25 years). The defining tasks of this stage include assuming responsibility for oneself, making independent decisions, and achieving financial independence. Zastrow and Kirst-Ashman (2015) describe this period as one of establishing long-term foundations, such as careers, marriage, parenthood, and broader social contribution. While this stage often represents a time of hope and opportunity, foster youth must navigate these developmental demands alongside the challenges of transitioning out of care (Gomez *et al.*, 2015; Olson *et al.*, 2017).

Guishard-Pine *et al.* (2007) point out that youth not in alternative care normally leave the homes of their birth parents when they are older, as opposed to children in care who may leave at 16 years or 17 years and struggle to cope with the practicalities of independent living. Leaving home for children from stable homes is a big step, for foster children who have had disruptions in their lives, it will be even more difficult. Foster children also may not have the benefit of having a safety net and will have several questions about where they belong, who cares for them, and who will be there for them during their transition. Since foster youth have little or no family support, they tend to be forced into independence sooner than other youth (Kim *et al.*, 2019).

5.4. LACK OF PREPARATION FOR AND OUTCOMES OF TRANSITIONING FROM FOSTER CARE

Several studies have found that foster youth transitioning out of care lack adequate preparation for this process, leading to poor outcomes.

5.4.1 LACK OF PREPARATION

Gomez *et al.* (2015) argue that emerging adults leaving foster care are more vulnerable than their peers in the general population, as the absence of permanency exposes them to placement instability, stigma, poor educational outcomes, and heightened risks of abuse and mental health difficulties. Their study of foster youth experiencing homelessness in the United States revealed patterns of learned helplessness, where young people felt ill-equipped to manage the demands of adult life. This underscores the need for interventions that build self-reliance and promote independence. Olson *et al.* (2017) similarly found that foster care alumni often struggle with decision-making, problem-solving, and the ability to generate stable income. Many reported feelings of isolation and resorted to risky survival strategies. These findings point to critical service gaps, particularly the absence of training in decision-making and problem-solving skills, which are vital for responsible adulthood.

South African studies reinforce these patterns. Research by Dhludhlu (2021), Mogale (2019), Sotshononda (2020), and Zimudzi (2022) highlights the absence of structured preparatory support, with youth reporting difficulties related to unemployment, poverty, inadequate housing, teenage pregnancy, poor educational achievement, and psychosocial distress. Sotshononda (2020) further notes that while young people were aware of the 21-year cut-off, they nonetheless felt unprepared for life after care and anxious about their future prospects, particularly in relation to employment.

Shaw *et al.* (2019) also found that social workers seldom equip foster youth with independent living skills. The most significant loss was the social grant as they had no income to meet their basic needs and they struggled to find employment. Likewise, Dhludhlu (2024), Goemans (2018) and Lesea (2017) found that the termination of the FCG was a concern, particularly as some youth experienced rejection when the grants stopped and were asked to leave the home. This suggests that foster care placements

are at times instrumentalised for financial gain, leaving young people vulnerable when support is withdrawn.

Lesea (2017) further found that while social workers encouraged educational completion, little attention was paid to creating economic opportunities for care-leavers such as facilitating engagement with the labour market or institutions of higher learning. This reflects a broader systemic incapacity, where both foster care and social work services fail to provide adequate preparation for adulthood. Without sustained investment in self-sufficiency and resilience, youth are likely to remain trapped in cycles of poverty and dependence.

Additionally, youth in the studies by Dhludhlu (2021) and Sotshononda (2020) reported limited participation in decisions regarding their lives and their subsequent discharge from foster care. This, despite international charters and South African legislation advocating for youth to be involved in all matters pertaining to their care. Heyman *et al.* (2020) similarly found that foster youth expressed a desire to be actively consulted in decisions that affect their lives.

Studies in the residential care context in South Africa with youth preparing to exit care confirm similar challenges. Meyer (2008) and Oelofsen (2015) found that residential facilities often fail to provide youth with practical skills for independent living, with staff assuming responsibility for daily needs and limiting young people's autonomy. Moodley *et al.* (2018) and Gamede (2020) highlight how outsourcing basic tasks such as housekeeping prevents young people from acquiring essential life skills. Conversely, Mmusi (2013) found that some youth valued the social skills learned in care, though they initially struggled to apply these in real-world contexts. These findings reveal that inadequate preparation for independent living is both pervasive and deeply consequential, shaping the long-term outcomes of care-leavers in South Africa and beyond.

5.4.2 OUTCOMES FOR YOUTH TRANSITIONING OUT OF CARE

5.4.2.1 POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

Achieving higher education remains an important aspiration for many foster youth (Pecora *et al.*, 2010; Salazar *et al.*, 2016; Sandh *et al.*, 2020; Sarubbi *et al.*, 2016; Watt

et al., 2019). Yet, despite this ambition, research consistently demonstrates barriers to post-secondary enrolment and retention. Pecora *et al.* (2010), Smith (2011), and White *et al.* (2015) highlight that the majority of foster youth face challenges in accessing and sustaining post-secondary education, underscoring the gap between aspirations and actual educational outcomes.

Studies from the USA illustrates both the nature of these barriers and potential strategies to address them. Sandh *et al.* (2020), in a study with college-enrolled foster youth, found that educational instability and inadequate academic preparation limited their ability to succeed at the tertiary level. They argued for the integration of college-preparatory programmes within high schools to build readiness. Similarly, Day *et al.* (2018) showed that exposure to pre-college programmes significantly increased enrolment, with 86 out of 142 participants enrolling in higher education. However, the study also revealed weak retention rates, suggesting that interventions must extend beyond access to include mechanisms for sustained academic support. This finding aligns with broader critiques of USA policy that despite a range of interventions targeting education, employment, housing, and mental health (Greeson *et al.*, 2020; Salazar *et al.*, 2016; Sarubbi *et al.*, 2016; Watt *et al.*, 2019), foster youth continue to struggle to meet their developmental and educational goals. Salazar *et al.* (2016), drawing on perspectives from both youth and community stakeholders, argue that successful interventions must be youth-driven, relationship-based, flexible, and responsive to past trauma, while engaging multiple stakeholders. Complementing this, Watt *et al.* (2019), in a large-scale study of 3,855 foster youth, found that even where tuition waivers were available, educational outcomes remained poor due to non-tuition barriers such as inadequate family support, housing instability, and limited access to academic resources like tutoring.

In South Africa, NSFAS provides substantial support for students from disadvantaged backgrounds (NSFAS, 2023). For foster youth, social workers typically provide a confirmation letter of foster care status to enable their application to NSFAS. While this financial assistance is widely welcomed, research by Dhludhlu (2021), Lesea (2017), Moodley *et al.* (2018), and Rembuluwani (2014) shows that even academically capable foster care alumni often fail to enrol in higher education due to unmet financial needs, particularly costs beyond tuition. Thus, although NSFAS reduces some

barriers, foster youth continue to experience financial shortfalls that restrict both access and academic success, underscoring that financial challenges remain a decisive factor shaping their educational outcomes.

5.4.2.2 EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES

Employment outcomes for care leavers are shaped by limited educational attainment, inadequate preparation and career planning. Smith (2011) underscores that many youth exit care without basic skills for employment, financial management, or housing, deficiencies rooted not in individual failings but in the lack of structured support within the care system. Interventions such as Stevenson's (2015) career group programme emphasise the importance of early, structured career guidance, yet these remain under-implemented.

South African studies by Mogale (2019), Sotshononda (2020), and Zimudzi (2022) show that foster care alumni often struggle to secure stable employment, while Dhludhlu (2024) found that many rely on the relationships formed while in care to survive after leaving the system. These challenges highlight the vulnerability of this group in the labour market. At the same time, education remains a key factor shaping employment prospects. Foster youth who do not succeed in school are less likely to pursue higher education, which limits their chances of stable work and independence.

5.4.2.3 HOUSING

Housing instability is one of the most acute risks for youth leaving care. USA studies (Heyman *et al.*, 2020; Pecora *et al.*, 2010; Prince *et al.*, 2019; Sinclair, 2005; Smith, 2011) reveal high rates of homelessness, with many youth staying informally with different acquaintances, as opposed to living on the streets or in shelters. While some studies advocate for expanded housing provision (Day *et al.*, 2018; Prince *et al.*, 2019), limited investment means care leavers are often forced into precarious arrangements.

South African research mirrors these findings (Dhludhlu, 2021, 2024; Mogale, 2019), underscoring how the abrupt withdrawal of foster care grants at age 18 or 21 leaves young people without safety nets. Here, the contradiction is stark, the very care

systems designed to provide stability actively create homelessness by withdrawing support at the very moment independence is expected.

5.4.2.4 STIGMA, POOR MENTAL AND HEALTH OUTCOMES

The trauma of maltreatment and unstable placements continues to manifest in poor mental health and risky health behaviours upon leaving care. White *et al.* (2015), in their study found that one-third of alumni carried a mental health diagnosis, while Martin *et al.* (2022) identified health risk behaviours among youth about to exit care. Both highlight the lack of early, preventative interventions to address trauma before independence.

Equally significant are the experiences of stigma (Sotshononda, 2020; Zimudzi, 2022; Meyer, 2008; Moodley *et al.*, 2018). Youth report discrimination linked to their foster care status, particularly those exiting CYCCs, compounding feelings of exclusion. Stigma functions as an invisible barrier; it not only isolates youth socially but also undermines their self-concept and capacity to seek support.

5.4.3 SUPPORTIVE RELATIONSHIPS, SOCIAL NETWORKS AND RESILIENCE

Several studies reveal that supportive relationships and social networks play a crucial role in youth leaving care. They could receive the support from the foster parent, social workers, biological families, friends and peers. (Best & Blakeslee, 2020; Pecora *et al.*, 2010; Prince *et al.*, 2019; Scannapieco *et al.*, 2016; Smith, 2011).

Sinclair *et al.* (2005) concluded that foster parents must be involved in planning for the transition for their foster youth and support the young person when they leave. Their study highlighted the valuable role that the foster carer can play to young people as they move onto independent living, by being their safety net, and providing some financial assistance and accommodation. Likewise, Guishard-Pine *et al.* (2007) assert that since foster children are likely to experience several placements, the foster parent plays a role in creating an empowering experience of moving on for youth, whether they are moving on to live independently, in a hostel, in supported lodgings or with relatives.

In comparison, studies by Goemans (2018), Mogale (2019) and Shaw *et al.* (2019) in South Africa revealed that not all foster carers are supportive to foster youth transitioning out of care. Many youth felt alone, with the responsibility of transitioning falling solely on their shoulders. Additionally, formal and informal networks of support are vital for youth exiting foster care, especially in relation to their educational, housing and psychological well-being. However, due to placement disruptions, foster youth may struggle to maintain stable social support networks, which may impact their emotional well-being and functioning after leaving care. (Prince *et al.*, 2019; Rosenberg, 2019).

Rosenberg (2019) examined social networks and utilisation of social support among foster youth transitioning out of care. The study reveals that most of the youth had someone in their formal network to provide support. Likewise, Smith (2011) proposes that transition plans must include an aspect on relationships and identifying an adult to maintain an ongoing relationship with the youth, rebuilding relationships with their families of origin and nurturing relationships with substitute caregivers, peers and other significant adults. Studies by Dhludhlu (2021) and Heyman *et al.* (2020) also reveal that the youth obtained support from their biological families, friends, peers and other significant people during their transition.

Best and Blakeslee (2020) conducted a study with 22 youth exiting care and found that they receive different types of support such as emotional, concrete, and informational support. They concluded that it is vital to support relationships that youth ageing out of care identify as meaningful as these networks can be helpful. The importance of maintaining supportive networks is also crucial for youth transitioning out of residential facilities. Moodley *et al.* (2018) conducted a study in South Africa involving 16 youth who had left residential care, highlighting the importance of social networks during this transition. These networks included support from host families and mentors who provided guidance with training, further education, employment opportunities, and accommodation. Similarly, Van Breda (2024a) emphasized that supportive relationships significantly contribute to successful outcomes for youth leaving residential care, underscoring the importance for child and youth care workers to establish and maintain trusting relationships with these young people.

Resilience has also been a key factor in achieving positive outcomes for care leavers. Research by Mogale (2019), Sotshononda (2020), Van Breda and Dickens (2017) and Zimudzi (2022) shows that, despite the difficulties faced by youth transitioning out of care, many demonstrate resilience when confronting these adversities. These young people often exhibit a strong determination to build their lives and plan for the future. Some have successfully achieved independent living and maintain a sense of hope for a better life.

The above studies highlights that supportive relationships and stable social networks are central to the success of youth transitioning out of care. While some foster parents, social workers, peers, and extended families provide essential emotional, financial, and practical assistance, many young people continue to face fragmented support systems. The contrast between supportive and unsupportive transitions underscores the unevenness of care experiences, where some youth benefit from enduring safety nets while others are left to navigate independence in isolation. The resilience demonstrated by many care leavers speaks to their determination and agency, but reliance on individual resilience alone risks obscuring the structural responsibilities of the state, caregivers, and child welfare systems to provide sustained, relational, and material support. Ultimately, ensuring positive outcomes requires a deliberate focus on fostering enduring, meaningful connections and creating enabling environments that allow care leavers not only to survive but to flourish.

5.5 INDEPENDENT LIVING PROGRAMMES FOR YOUTH IN ALTERNATIVE CARE

Earlier discussions reveal that care-leavers encounter significant challenges both during and after placement, with many not adequately prepared for independent living. Unlike their peers, youth exiting foster care must navigate unique processes that often leave them at a disadvantage. Consequently, there is a pressing need for structured interventions to ease this transition, one of the most common being independent living programmes (Bald *et al.*, 2022; Kim *et al.*, 2019; Liu *et al.*, 2019; Mitchell *et al.*, 2015; Smith, 2011).

Independent living programmes aim to strengthen outcomes for foster youth across domains such as education, housing, and employment. They are primarily targeted at adolescents for whom reunification or adoption is unlikely, addressing not only practical preparation for adulthood but also the long-term effects of trauma and instability associated with foster care (Bald *et al.*, 2022; Liu *et al.*, 2019; Smith, 2011). Evidence from the USA demonstrates the potential of such interventions, for example, Kim *et al.* (2019), in a study involving 4,206 foster youth, found that programme participants were more likely to complete secondary school, pursue post-secondary education, and secure full-time employment, suggesting that access to such support increases social and economic mobility.

Mitchell *et al.* (2015) and Scannapieco *et al.* (2016) further emphasise that preparation for adulthood should begin early, equipping youth with practical skills and linking them to support structures. They argue that these programmes should remain flexible, recognising that some youth require extended care arrangements. Extending placements allows for gradual transitions in which support, guidance, and stability are maintained until young people are sufficiently equipped to manage independence.

In South Africa, however, there is limited evidence of independent living programmes designed for foster youth. Research highlights a lack of formal guidelines and structured pathways to assist youth in preparing for transitions out of care (Dhludhlu, 2021; Lesea, 2017; Shaw, 2019; Shaw *et al.*, 2019). One notable exception is Project Lungisela, initiated by Mamelani Projects in Cape Town. This initiative adopts a two-phase approach; first, equipping youth with life skills before they leave care, and second, providing after-care support, including mentoring, educational assistance, internships, and career guidance for those continuing education or training (Tanur, 2012). Based on its success with youth ageing out of residential care, Project Lungisela piloted an intervention enabling young people to remain in foster care beyond the termination of grants, ensuring continuity of support. In addition to the practical assistance offered, the programme also created spaces for young people to share experiences, instilling hope and demonstrating the value of peer networks and collective resilience. The project emphasizes that expecting care leavers to be entirely self-sufficient is unrealistic, advocating instead for a model of interdependent living.

The model of interdependent living promoted by Project Lungisela has influenced subsequent South African studies on youth exiting both cluster foster care (Goemans, 2018) and residential care (Moodley *et al.*, 2018). These studies underscore that independence, narrowly conceived, is often unrealistic and can set care leavers up for failure. Instead, interdependence, rooted in strong social networks, relational support, and resilience, provides a more sustainable framework for transition. Van Breda (2024a) advances this view by calling for the re-framing of “independent living programmes” as “interdependent living programmes,” highlighting the necessity of embedding care-leavers within overlapping networks of support that foster both self-reliance and belonging. This way of thinking challenges the idea that young people must become completely self-sufficient on their own and instead highlights that successful transitions rely on support from relationships, communities, and institutions.

5.6 SOCIAL WORKER’S ROLE

Social workers play an instrumental role in preparing foster youth for independent living. However, international and local studies cited above have all noted that social workers were not able to fulfil this role.

In South Africa, social workers report that they struggle to render after care services. Studies by Lesea (2017), Shaw *et al.* (2019) and Sotshononda (2020) reflect high caseloads, a lack of resources, backlog of cases and the focus being on quantity rather than quality that impact services to youth exiting care.

Based on the voices of the youth, foster parents and social workers in the studies discussed, the following recommendations are made to assist foster youth in transitioning into interdependent living:

- ✓ As a matter of urgency, there is a need to develop guidelines and policies to strengthen the process of transitioning for youth leaving the care system (Dhludhlu, 2021; Shaw *et al.*, 2019).
- ✓ Social workers should be trained on independent living programmes, and these should be implemented before the youth ages out of care (Shaw *et al.*, 2019)

- ✓ Social workers must implement transitional and preparatory services to foster youth, as well as implement independent living programmes (Mogale, 2019).
- ✓ Foster youth exiting foster care should be equipped with economic skills and linked them to employment opportunities (Lesea, 2017; Sotshononda, 2020)
- ✓ Social workers should support youth after they leave care and equip them with skills that will help them to survive. Social workers should also advocate for the formulation and implementation of strategies to support youth after care (Zimudzi, 2022).
- ✓ The focus should be on interdependent living programmes that focus on building the skills of the youth and strengthening the networks around the youth (Goemans, 2018; Moodley *et al.*, 2018; Van Breda, 2024a).

Social workers are important in helping foster youth prepare for life after care, but many challenges prevent them from fully doing this. High caseloads, few resources, and a focus on numbers over quality mean youth often leave care without enough support. The above recommendations show that clear policies, practical life skills programmes, and continued support after leaving care are urgently needed. These steps can help foster youth build independence, strong support networks, and better chances for a successful future.

5.7 CONCLUSION

This chapter focused on the transition of youth from foster care to interdependent living. Foster youth often face challenges in education, post-secondary education, accommodation and securing employment, which can hinder their ability to become contributing members of society in the long term. The studies discussed emphasize the importance of providing support to foster youth both during their time in care and after they leave, to ensure a smoother transition to adulthood. To achieve this, it is essential for the government to allocate the necessary resources, ensuring that foster youth are not overlooked and receive the support they need during this critical period.

SECTION THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

CHAPTER SIX: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

6.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on the research methodology employed to achieve the study's aims and objectives. The research paradigm and design are examined, followed by a detailed discussion of the sampling strategies, data collection tools, and methods of data analysis. Additionally, the ethical considerations and the trustworthiness of the study are discussed, concluding with the study's limitations.

6.2 RESEARCH PARADIGM

To determine the appropriate research paradigm, I revisited the aim of the study, which was to understand the factors that contribute to the successful educational outcomes for youth currently or formerly in foster care as perceived by foster youth, their foster parents, and their social workers. Additionally, I intended to analyse secondary data by reviewing case records of the foster youth. To achieve the aim and objectives of the study, a qualitative research paradigm emerged as the most suitable approach. Creswell (2013, p. 44) asserts that “qualitative research begins with assumptions and the use of interpretive frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meanings that individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem”. Furthermore, qualitative research is conducted when there is a need to explore a problem or issue in depth. This exploration will allow the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the issue, by speaking with the people themselves. Additionally, qualitative research is conducted to encourage individuals to share their stories and to hear their voices (Creswell, 2013).

The qualitative research paradigm has the following characteristics that influenced my choice:

- ✓ Qualitative research is conducted in the natural setting, with the researcher gathering information directly from the participants, by face-to-face interactions.
- ✓ It provides a detailed understanding of the social world of participants, by focusing on the sense that they make of their circumstances, experiences, perspectives and histories.

- ✓ The researcher is the key instrument of collecting data, as they examine documents, observe behaviour and interview participants.
- ✓ Data is collected from multiple sources, such as interviews, observations, and documents.
- ✓ Qualitative research methods are utilized to generate deeper meanings of human experiences and richer observations that cannot be easily reduced to numbers.
- ✓ The research process is inductive, as it enables researchers to build on patterns, categories and themes across the data.
- ✓ It allows for reflexivity where the role and the perspective of the researcher is considered (Creswell, 2014; Ormston, *et al.*, 2014; Rubin & Babbie, 2016).

In conducting social research, it is crucial for researchers to consider the ontological and epistemological assumptions that underpin qualitative research (Creswell, 2013; Ormston *et al.*, 2014). Ontology focuses on the nature of reality and our understanding of the world (Creswell, 2013; Ormston *et al.*, 2014). One of the characteristics of ontology is that reality is multiple and viewed through many lenses. The researcher reports on these different perspectives as themes develop in the findings (Creswell, 2013). In this study, I acknowledged that the participants themselves knew best what their reality was, and I sought to understand these realities from their points of view.

Epistemology focuses on what we know and learn about the world, as well as what constitutes knowledge itself (Creswell, 2013; Ormston *et al.*, 2014). Creswell (2013) further adds that the researcher aims to connect closely with the participants and obtain their individual viewpoints. Consequently, knowledge is derived from the subjective experiences of the participants. I regarded the participants in this study as experts on their experiences and capable of sharing these experiences in detail.

Within the qualitative research framework, an interpretivist research paradigm is relevant as the researcher endeavours to gain an in-depth subjective understanding of individuals' lives, including their daily experiences and emotions (Rubin & Babbie, 2016). This paradigm not only guides the analysis of people's actions, but seeks to understand why people behave the way they do and what influences their decision-making (Yegidis *et al.*, 2018). An interpretivist stance focuses on producing knowledge by exploring and understanding the social world of the people being studied, and their

meanings and interpretations. Moreover, the aim is to construct meanings and interpretations rooted in the data obtained directly from the participants (Ormston *et al.*, 2014) thereby enabling me to understand their world from their unique perspectives.

6.3 RESEARCH DESIGN

Creswell (2013) outlines five key designs for qualitative research; narrative research, phenomenological research, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study research, which were carefully considered in the selection of the research design for this study. According to Creswell (2013), narrative research involves collecting stories from individuals about their lived experiences using various methods such as interviews, documents, and pictures. Phenomenological studies aim to uncover the common meaning of lived experiences related to a specific concept or phenomenon. Grounded theory goes beyond a description, to develop or uncover a theory for a process or action. In ethnographic studies, the researcher immerses themselves in the daily lives of a group of people sharing the same culture to describe and interpret their patterns of values, beliefs, behaviours and language. Finally, case study research examines a specific case within its real-life context (Yin, 2003).

Creswell (2013) and Rubin and Babbie (2016) elaborate that case study research involves examining one or multiple cases, through in-depth data collection from multiple sources including documents, observations and interviews, to explore the intricacies of the cases. The exploration and integration of the multiple perspectives in case studies build a detailed understanding of a phenomenon under investigation allowing the researcher to generate rich and meaningful interpretations (Lewis & Nicholls, 2014; Padgett, 2017; Yin, 2003).

There are three primary types of case studies:

- ✓ Intrinsic case study where the focus is on the specific case itself and no attempt is made to generalise beyond the single case.
- ✓ Instrumental case study where the case is examined to gain insight into an issue.

- ✓ Collective case study that involves studying a number of cases to understand a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Padgett, 2017 and Stake (2000) as cited in Silverman, 2013).

This study aimed to explore the factors that support successful educational outcomes for youth in or formerly in foster care. Given the complexity and depth of the topic, a collective case study design was the most suitable approach, as it provided insights from multiple perspectives, including foster youth, their foster parents, and social workers.

According to Lewis and Nicholls (2014) case study research also serves as a valuable approach to comparison, as it allows for an in-depth exploration and insight into a specific phenomenon. A comparative collective case study design was adopted in this study to investigate the educational outcomes of foster youth who had progressed to tertiary education and those who dropped out of school. Lewis and Nicholls (2014) emphasize that the value of comparison in qualitative research lies in understanding differences rather than quantifying them as is in quantitative research. Through comparison, qualitative studies highlight the absence or presence of phenomena across different groups, examine different perspectives on the same phenomena and explore how different groups experience the same phenomena differently.

The chosen comparative collective case study design allowed for the selection of multiple cases, including foster youth who had successfully progressed to tertiary education and those who had dropped out of school, as well as their foster parents and social workers involved in their educational journey. This multi-perspective approach facilitated the exploration of differences and similarities across cases, enabling comparisons that uncovered subtle patterns and contextual factors influencing educational outcomes. The depth of the study was enhanced through data triangulation, combining semi-structured interviews with foster youth and foster parents, focus groups with social workers, and a detailed analysis of case records. Each method contributed uniquely, interviews provided first-hand accounts of lived experiences, focus groups allowed for dialogue and reflection that highlighted systemic and relational dynamics, and case records offered objective documentation of historical and contextual factors. Together, these methods enabled the study to uncover nuanced insights, such as the interplay between foster placement stability,

social support, and personal resilience, which shaped the educational trajectories of the youth. This comprehensive approach ensured that the findings reflected the complex, multi-layered realities of foster youth education rather than surface-level observations.

6.4 SELECTING THE SAMPLE

Rubin and Babbie (2017) note that social work research studies typically involve the observation of specific people or phenomena, aiming to generate tentative new insights about a larger population. According to Padgett (2017), the selection of the sampling methodology depends on the research questions and objectives of the study. Below is an overview of the various aspects of sampling.

6.4.1 TYPES OF SAMPLING

There are two types of sampling strategies; probability sampling and nonprobability sampling. Probability sampling, including techniques like random sampling, follows a precise, scientific protocol, making it suitable for quantitative studies. The application of probability sampling in social work research is not always feasible. In these instances, nonprobability sampling is the preferred alternative. Non-probability sampling is more suitable in qualitative studies as it entails the deliberate selection of participants. Given the nature of this study, nonprobability sampling was the most appropriate (Ritchie *et al.*, 2014; Rubin & Babbie, 2017).

6.4.2 NONPROBABILITY SAMPLING TECHNIQUES

Rubin and Babbie (2017) outline several nonprobability sampling techniques, such as accidental or convenience sampling, snowball sampling, quota sampling, and purposive sampling, each suited to specific research needs. Purposive sampling is mostly used among qualitative researchers as it involves carefully selecting participants to provide the relevant and meaningful information needed for the study's objectives (Creswell, 2013; Padgett, 2017).

According to Creswell (2013), there are three important considerations regarding purposeful sampling. Firstly, the selection of participants should represent diverse cases, as this allows for a detailed exploration of multiple perspectives. In the context

of this study, including foster youth who had progressed to tertiary education, those who had dropped out of school, their foster parents, and the social workers supporting them enabled the capture of the complex interplay of personal, relational, and systemic factors influencing educational outcomes. Secondly, individuals should be chosen for their ability to inform the understanding of the research problem or phenomenon. This was achieved by deliberately selecting participants whose experiences aligned with the study's objectives, ensuring that each could provide unique and relevant insights into the factors shaping educational trajectories. Thirdly, while case studies often involve a small sample size, it should be sufficient to identify thematic patterns and facilitate cross-case analysis, with the focus being on depth rather than breadth.

Lewis *et al.* (2014) further explain that in purposeful sampling, participants are selected to ensure that key aspects relevant to the subject matter are covered, while sufficient diversity exists within each criterion to allow meaningful exploration. These criteria may include characteristics, demographics, experiences, and attitudes. Establishing the selection criteria early in the study, guided by the study's aim and existing knowledge, is therefore vital. For this study, purposive sampling was utilized to select participants whose experiences were most relevant to the research objectives, thereby enhancing the richness, relevance, and analytical depth of the findings.

6.4.3 LOCATION OF THE STUDY

In qualitative research, the study locations typically focus on a limited number of geographical, community, or organizational settings. This ensures a clear understanding of the research context (Ritchie, *et al.*, 2014). This study was situated in Pietermaritzburg, within the Province of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

6.4 4 STUDY POPULATION

The initial step in the sample design involves the target of sampling. This requires the researcher to carefully consider which population will be able to provide the richest and most relevant information to the research questions. It also involves a thoughtful reflection on who should be excluded from the study, as their inclusion might be inappropriate or insensitive. The researcher must also give thought to whether there are additional groups or subpopulations that warrant inclusion because their

perspectives and experiences may bring similar or different insights to the study (Ritchie *et al.*, 2014). Aligned with the study's aim and objectives, four distinct population groups were identified; foster youth who progressed to tertiary education, former foster youth who dropped out of school, their foster parents and their social workers.

6.4.5 SAMPLE FRAME

The sampling frame is the list of elements comprising the study population and the inventory of potential cases from which the sample is drawn (Rubin & Babbie, 2017; Yegidis, *et al.*, 2018). Once the study populations have been determined, the subsequent step involves identifying a sample frame from which the sample can be extracted. There are two alternatives for a sample frame; utilising existing sources or generating sampling frames. Existing sources encompass administrative records, published lists and survey samples. However, if the study population cannot be ascertained through existing sources, the creation of the sample frame is necessary. This would entail collaborating with organisations that provide services to the particular population for the study (Ritchie *et al.*, 2014).

The sample groups were selected from service users of four CPOs in Pietermaritzburg, as well as the social workers employed by these organizations. These are NGOs that provide statutory services to foster children and their families in the area.

Padgett (2017) states that the qualitative researcher goes to where the participants are. To reach the participants, I had to secure the cooperation of intermediaries such as gatekeepers. The directors of the selected organizations acted as gatekeepers for this study. They were contacted telephonically and given a comprehensive overview of the study's aim, objectives and significance. Upon expressing interest in their organizations' participation, the directors were furnished with written information about the study (Appendix 1). Subsequently, they consented for the study to continue with their service users and employed social workers, contingent upon meeting all ethical considerations (Appendix 2). Ethical clearance was obtained for the study from the University of KwaZulu Natal, Humanities and Social Sciences Research Committee – Protocol reference number: HSSREC/00003523/2021 (Appendix 3). Written

confirmation of ethical clearance was forwarded to the organisations before I proceeded to contact the social workers.

Before my direct contact with the social workers, their directors briefed them about the study's nature. I subsequently visited the social workers at the four organizations to explain the study's aim and objectives. During these visits, the social workers were given the opportunity to seek clarity and ask questions about the study. Both the social workers and their service users were invited to participate in the study. The social workers consented to participate and assist in recruiting participants for the study. Social workers were requested to assist with participant recruitment because of their direct involvement with foster youth and their families, as well as their understanding of the youths' educational histories, placement experiences, and support needs. Their training and professional role positioned them to identify foster youth who met the study's selection criteria, ensuring that the participants recruited could provide relevant and rich insights. The social workers' professional ethics and values, guided by the South African Council for Social Services Professions (SACSSP) Code of Conduct, also ensured that recruitment and engagement with participants were conducted in a sensitive, ethical, and responsible manner, particularly given the vulnerability of the population (SACSSP, 2016). Additionally, all participants provided written consent prior to the interviews to ensure their voluntary participation and to avoid any form of coercion. Although social workers assisted in the recruitment of foster youth and their foster families, this process remained consistent with the principles of purposive sampling, as participants were still deliberately selected based on predefined criteria relevant to the study's objectives.

A further factor to consider was the sample size to ensure that it aligned with the study goals (Padgett, 2017). Different qualitative approaches have varying considerations regarding sample size, and there is no set rule governing it. Ritchie *et al.* (2014) note that qualitative studies typically have small sample sizes as the focus is on the richness and depth of information, rather than on numbers. Additionally, qualitative research often involves intensive data collection and analysis, which can be time-consuming and span several years. These factors were considered in determining the sample size for this study.

Social workers from the four organizations were requested to compile lists of youth who had been in foster care, were over 18 years old, and had discontinued their schooling within the past three years. These individuals were no longer in foster care. Additionally, the organizations were asked to compile another list of youth who were in foster care, were over 18 years old, and were enrolled in tertiary institutions. A total of 52 foster youth who had progressed to tertiary education and 78 school leavers were identified as potential participants for the study. From these lists, participants were invited until 15 from each group agreed to participate in the study. Subsequently, their foster parents and social workers were invited to participate in interviews and focus group discussions.

It should be noted that I did not provide direct social work services to the foster youth or foster parents selected from the organization where I worked. They received direct services from the appointed social workers, and as a result, it was possible that I had not interacted with these participants prior to the study. This approach aimed to eliminate undue pressure on the participants to take part in the study.

Furthermore, because the study was conducted within the organisation where I am employed as a manager, I was mindful of the potential power dynamics between myself, the director (a registered social worker), and the social workers who were prospective participants. The SACSSP's Policy Guidelines for Course of Conduct, Code of Ethics and the Rules for Social Workers emphasise the importance of avoiding dual relationships that may impair professional judgment or risk exploitation, and of acting in ways that uphold the autonomy and dignity of others (SACSSP, 2016). Similarly, the IFSW (2018) definition of social work highlights the profession's commitment to human rights, self-determination, and social justice. These principles guided the research process.

To safeguard voluntary participation, the director's involvement was limited to informing social workers of the study and inviting them to an introductory meeting. No one was approached directly or pressured to participate. Informed consent forms (Appendix 12) were used to reinforce these safeguards. The forms made it clear that participation was voluntary, withdrawal was possible at any time without penalty, no payment would be provided, and confidentiality would be maintained. They also included the contact details of the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics

Committee (UKZN), giving participants an independent avenue to raise concerns outside organisational structures.

By ensuring voluntary participation, separating managerial and research roles, providing clear written assurances, I sought to reduce the risks of coercion and maintain compliance with both SACSSP ethical guidelines and international standards. In this way, the study respected participants' autonomy while addressing the complexities of organisational hierarchies and the inherent challenges of researcher practitioner dual roles (Landau, 2008).

Additionally, when introducing the research to the social workers, I highlighted their role as experts with valuable knowledge to share. This approach helped create a more equal and collaborative exchange, rather than a top-down relationship. As D'Cruz (2000) argues, recognising participants as experts in their own field fosters a more democratic research process, one that challenges researcher control and encourages shared learning. In this way, the professional expertise of the social workers was acknowledged, and an environment of mutual respect and reciprocity was promoted.

The sample included:

- ✓ 15 youth currently in foster care and attending tertiary institutions
- ✓ 15 youth who were in foster care and have discontinued schooling
- ✓ 15 foster parents
- ✓ 16 social workers

The criteria for inclusion in each sample was as follows:

Sample one:

- ✓ Youth over the age of 18 who were in related or unrelated foster care
- ✓ Youth currently attending tertiary institutions
- ✓ Male and female foster youth willing to participate

Sample two

- ✓ Youth over the age of 18 who dropped out of school within the last three years
- ✓ Youth who had been in related or unrelated foster care
- ✓ Male and female youth willing to participate

Sample three

- ✓ Foster parents of those youth selected to be part of the study
- ✓ Foster parents willing to participate

Sample four:

- ✓ Social workers supervising the youth selected for the study
- ✓ Social workers with over two years' experience in rendering statutory services
- ✓ Social workers willing to participate

The educators were initially considered as potential participants; however, they were excluded due to the following reasons:

- ✓ Each foster youth likely had many educators, making it difficult to choose one specific educator for the study.
- ✓ The foster youth might not have been identified as “foster children” at school for fear of stigmatization.
- ✓ The interviews with the educators would have therefore been generic and not specifically related to the foster youth in the study.

The social workers acted as gatekeepers for the foster youth and their foster parents. They played a crucial role by reaching out to the selected participants and facilitating introductions. The social workers explained the study's nature to the participants, who were then given the choice to participate. The social workers also facilitated the scheduling of interviews with the participants. They were requested to inform the participants that while no payment would be provided, reimbursement for transport expenses and refreshments would be provided.

Despite the organizations having foster youth who had dropped out of school in the last three years, recruitment for the study proved challenging. This was due to changes in the contact details of foster youth and some individuals expressing reluctance to participate. Consequently, the sample was expanded to include youth who had left school in the last five years. Although this adjustment increased the age range of participants, it did not impact the study's objectives, as the focus remained on exploring the educational trajectories and outcomes of foster youth, regardless of the specific timing of school exit. This decision was made in consultation with my

supervisors, who guided the process to ensure that it remained consistent with the ethical parameters of the approved study.

Furthermore, some of the youth selected based on their enrolment in tertiary education had recently completed their studies and were awaiting graduation. This also did not impact the study's objectives.

6.5. DATA COLLECTION

6.5.1 PREPARING FOR FIELDWORK

Arthur *et al.* (2014) point out the importance of designing fieldwork for qualitative studies. This includes the methods of data collection, techniques for recording data and pilot testing.

6.5.1.1 METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

Babbie and Mouton (2001) emphasize the significance of incorporating multiple data sources in case studies. This necessitates the adoption of diverse data collection methods, the selection of which depends on the specific research questions. By utilizing a variety of methods, researchers increase their confidence in the trustworthiness of their findings.

In this study, data collection encompassed the following methods:

- ✓ Interviews
- ✓ Focus groups
- ✓ Examination of case records

6.5.1.1.1 INTERVIEWS

Babbie (2016) describes a qualitative interview as a conversation between an interviewer and a respondent, guided by a general plan of topics rather than a fixed set of questions. In social work research, conducting in-person interviews is often used for data collection as it enables the researcher to probe into how individuals experience phenomena and give meaning to them, capturing their perspectives (Yegidis, *et al.*, 2018). The interview process involves a dynamic exchange where

researchers pose questions, actively listen, and express genuine interest, while participants freely share insights and emotions (Neuman, 2007).

Yegidis *et al.* (2018) cites several advantages of interviews:

- ✓ They afford the researchers the opportunity to probe and clarify, enabling the researcher to gain deeper and more accurate data.
- ✓ In-person interview enables the researcher to acquire comprehensive data.
- ✓ Researchers are able to obtain supplementary data, by observing the participants non-verbal cues and reactions.

However, in-person interviews also come with their own set of challenges:

- ✓ The researcher's presence may influence the participant's responses, leading to biased answers.
- ✓ The potential for recording errors exists.
- ✓ Demographic differences such as language, race and culture between the researcher and the participants may influence the research process (Yegidis *et al.*, 2018).

When it comes to data collection through interviews, a crucial step is the creation of topic guides, also referred to as interview guides, schedules, or protocols that are essential for structuring interviews (Arthur *et al.*, 2014; Creswell, 2013). Topic guides play a dual role; ensuring a level of consistency in data collection while allowing researchers the flexibility to delve into specifics with each participant. Drawing up a topic guide begins with a thorough review of the study's aim, objectives, and relevant literature. This guides researchers in identifying key issues to cover. Subsequently, researchers must consider the order of these issues for exploration. The interview guide should include an introduction and context setting, opening topics, clarifying concepts, substantive questions, winding down, finishing on a positive note, and summarizing. Additionally, careful attention is paid to the language and terminology employed in the topic guide, ensuring clarity and in line with the participants' understanding (Arthur *et al.*, 2014). I attended to all of these aspects when designing the interview guides for this study (Appendix 4).

In designing the interview guide, I actively sought input from my research supervisors, colleagues, and experts in the field. This process involved sharing draft versions of the

guide, discussing the wording and sequencing of questions, and reflecting on whether the questions were likely to generate rich, relevant data without being repetitive or leading. Feedback from supervisors ensured that the guide remained aligned with the study's objectives, while colleagues and experts in the field contributed by helping me anticipate potential challenges in engaging foster youth, foster parents, and social workers in discussion, and by suggesting ways to phrase sensitive questions appropriately. This consultative approach, as recommended by Arthur et al. (2014), helped refine the tool to maximise its effectiveness, while maintaining alignment to the research aim and objectives. I recognised the language difference among the participants and prepared for this by arranging for interpreters to assist during the interviews. The interview schedules themselves were not translated, but prior to the interviews, the interpreters were thoroughly briefed on the schedules to ensure accurate and effective communication and to maintain that the study's aim was not compromised, as outlined by Padgett (2017).

6.5.1.1.2 FOCUS GROUPS

According to Neuman (2007), a focus group represents a distinctive qualitative design where individuals are informally interviewed within a group setting typically comprising six to eight participants. Finch *et al.* (2014) highlight that the primary aim of a focus group is to encourage interaction among participants and facilitate the generation of data through shared experiences and viewpoints. Participants engage in discussions, that may result in further inquiries, seeking clarification, and participants sharing additional insights. As participants respond to one another, they often reveal deeper aspects of their experiences. Like with the interviews, a schedule was devised to guide the discussions with the foster parents and social workers (Appendices 5 and 6) (Arthur *et al.*, 2014; Creswell, 2013).

6.5.1.1.3 CASE FILE ANALYSIS

Yegidis *et al.* (2018) highlight the different types of records maintained by human service organizations, such as case files. Rubin and Babbie (2017) note the use of existing data sources, such as agency case records and process notes, as a means of collecting data. This approach offers several advantages, including its unobtrusive nature, cost-effectiveness, and ability to investigate past phenomena. Rubin and

Babbie (2017) further state that developing procedures for accessing case records is important. The researcher must secure office space for reviewing case records to safeguard confidentiality. Additionally, when using agency records, obtaining client permission may be necessary (Yegidis *et al.*, 2018). Arthur *et al.* (2014) also point out that examining cases can add to the depth and richness of data collection. I developed a data extraction form to collect background details and information relevant to the study (Appendix 7). This approach allowed for consistent data collection, easier comparison across cases, and efficient organization of information. While it may rely on the accuracy of records, the form provided a clear and structured method for gathering information.

6.5.1.2 DATA RECORDING PROCEDURES

Before starting with fieldwork, the researcher must establish the data recording protocols for the study (Creswell, 2014). Field notes serve as invaluable tools for documenting collected data and should be incorporated into the data collection process. They enable the researcher to capture their reflections, observations, and any pertinent issues arising during interviews. Alongside field notes, careful consideration should be given to whether interviews and focus groups will be audio-recorded (Arthur *et al.*, 2014). According to Silverman (2013), recording interviews is essential. This practice not only allows the researcher to fully engage in the interview process but also ensures an accurate verbatim record of the conversation, including language nuances and hesitations. It is imperative that the researcher provides clear justification for recording, while also addressing confidentiality and data storage procedures (Arthur *et al.*, 2014). In this study, I took notes during the interviews and focus groups, which were also recorded. Verbal and written permission was obtained from the participants for this.

6.5.1.3 PILOT TESTING

Reviewing interviews and questions through pilot testing is a critical step in research methodology (Creswell, 2013; Padgett, 2017; Silverman, 2013). Conducting pilot tests on the interview schedules or topic guides before commencing the study is essential. as this process helps the researcher in improving their interviewing skills and refining the structure of the interview (Arthur *et al.*, 2014).

In this study, pilot interviews were conducted with a foster youth, a foster parent, and a social worker. The purpose of these pilot interviews was to evaluate the clarity and relevance of the interview questions and to ensure they were appropriate of eliciting information aligned with the study's objectives. Engaging with participants during this stage allowed me to become familiar with the interview process, identify areas for improvement, and make necessary adjustments to enhance data collection. These adjustments included refining the interview schedule to eliminate repetitive questions and incorporating items more directly aligned with the research objectives. Following the pilot interviews, all sessions were transcribed, and the transcripts were submitted to my supervisors for review, ensuring that the data collection instruments were appropriate and consistent with the study's aim. The data obtained from the pilot interviews were subsequently included in the overall analysis because they provided meaningful insights relevant to the research questions.

6.5.2. CONDUCTING DATA COLLECTION

This study involved four distinct sample groups, as previously outlined. Individual interviews were held with 30 foster youth (15 who progressed tertiary education and 15 school leavers). The interviews lasted between 45 minutes to 90 minutes. Individual interviews; one dyadic interview and focus group discussions were conducted with the social workers. The initial plan was to conduct focus groups with foster parents; however, this approach was later changed to individual and dyadic interviews, which I discuss in more detail later in the chapter.

Social workers reached out to youth who met the study's criteria and their foster parents, explained details of the research, and invited them to participate. Once they had agreed to participate in the study, social workers scheduled interview appointments. Interviews and focus groups were arranged to be conducted at a private venue within organizations, ensuring a safe and confidential environment for the participants to freely share information. Yeo *et al.* (2014) emphasises the importance of such privacy for confidentiality.

The participants were introduced to the researcher by the social workers. I ascertained their comfort with conducting the session in English or with the assistance of an

IsiZulu-speaking interpreter if preferred. The social workers who agreed to act as interpreters were briefed on the study's aim, objectives, and interview schedule, and they provided verbal consent to maintain confidentiality. Maintaining confidentiality is consistent with the principles outlined in the SACSSP Code of Conduct and Ethics. I expressed gratitude to the youth and foster parents for their participation and offered a summary of the research's importance, explaining its purpose and goals. I began by explaining voluntary participation and informed consent to the youth and foster parents, assuring them that the study was granted ethical clearance and that no payment will be offered for their participation. Subsequently, I obtained consent from them for their participation. I obtained permission for audio recording the session and taking notes and reassured them of confidentiality and anonymity. This was essential for establishing trust and building rapport with the youth and the foster parents which Yeo *et al.* (2014) emphasises as critical in interviewing. The consent forms were in English and IsiZulu, depending on the preference of the youth and the foster parents (Appendices 8,9,10,11). During the focus groups, participants were asked to commit to maintaining confidentiality within the group, with any discussions outside requiring mutual consent. Refreshments and transport costs were provided to the youth and foster parents, with expenses covered by the researcher.

A similar process was followed with the social workers to confirm voluntary participation and obtain informed consent (Appendix 12).

As indicated above, social workers assisted with interpretation with some of the participants. In line with the *SACSSP Policy Guidelines for Course of Conduct, Code of Ethics and the Rules for Social Workers* (2016), their involvement was carefully managed to ensure voluntariness, confidentiality, and respect for participants' autonomy. Importantly, the social workers who acted as interpreters were not the case managers of the participants, thereby avoiding conflicts of interest and reducing the risk of coercion or perceived obligation. Interpreters were briefed on their roles and the importance of confidentiality was emphasized.

This approach reflected Landau's (2008) warning that dual roles and blurred boundaries in social work research can place pressure on participants and undermine their autonomy. Similarly, D'Cruz (2000) stresses the importance of reflexivity and

awareness of power relations to protect the integrity of the research. By making sure that social workers kept their roles as interpreters separate from their practice, reinforcing the voluntary nature of participation, and being transparent throughout, the study reduced the risk of clients feeling forced to take part and upheld ethical standards.

6.5.2.1 DATA COLLECTION WITH FOSTER YOUTH THAT PROGRESSED TO TERTIARY EDUCATION AND SCHOOL LEAVERS

I commenced the interview by obtaining contextual background information, trying to gain insight into the youth's circumstances. I then moved on to exploring the themes of the study, using open-ended questions and probing techniques to obtain more in-depth information. I demonstrated attentive listening by maintaining eye contact, nodding in response, and providing verbal acknowledgments to encourage the youth to share their experiences of being in foster care and their educational journeys (Yeo *et al.* 2014). In concluding the interview, I focused the conversation towards the youth's aspirations and future goals, and ended the interviews on a positive note. Additionally, I also requested permission to follow up for clarification or further information if necessary. I conducted thirty interviews with the youth, an experience that proved enlightening, but also exhausting and emotionally taxing. I was able to debrief with my supervisors and maintained a journal to document the emotional impact of listening to sensitive and difficult narratives, my thoughts, reflections, and insights. This helped to keep me grounded, process my emotions in a constructive way, and remain focused on the research aims while still being attentive to the wellbeing of participants.

Throughout these interviews, I explored sensitive topics concerning the youth's experiences of being in foster care and their educational experiences. I found my background and expertise as a social worker invaluable. Yegidis *et al.* (2018) assert that social workers are uniquely positioned for interviewing and establishing trust with participants, given their interviewing techniques, non-judgmental attitudes, and adherence to professional values and ethics. These characteristics enabled me to cultivate a trusting rapport with the participants, facilitating a more open exchange of experiences and insights. I felt even more encouraged when some of the youth shared that this was their first time engaging in a private discussion with a social worker where their perspectives were sought and heard. This feedback underscored the importance

of creating a safe space for the youth to share their experiences. It made me reflect on the importance of truly listening and validating their perspectives, rather than assuming their needs or experiences. I recognized how rare such opportunities can be for foster youth and this reinforced my commitment to maintaining an ethical, empathetic, and attentive stance throughout the research process.

Padgett (2017) and Yegidis et al. (2018) note that qualitative interviews can evoke intense emotions such as laughter, tears, or anger, requiring researchers to respond with sensitivity and care. This was evident in my interviews with the youth, where some participants became tearful while others expressed anger. In these moments, I provided empathetic support by creating a safe space for them to share their feelings and gently guiding the conversation to restore calm. To avoid breaching participant confidentiality, I did not make direct referrals for counselling but encouraged participants to seek support from their social workers. Anticipating such needs, I had arranged at the outset for organizational social workers to be available to provide counselling services if required (Appendix 13).

6.5.2.2 DATA COLLECTION WITH FOSTER PARENTS

Focus group discussions were planned for the foster parents in this study. It was anticipated that foster parents would feel comfortable sharing and building upon each other's responses within a supportive environment. Furthermore, the group setting was chosen to encourage them to share their experiences openly, benefiting from mutual support. Attendance at the focus groups was low. After consultation with my supervisors, individual interviews were held with most of the foster parents. Padgett (2017) does note that some of the challenges of focus groups, include scheduling difficulties, and potential attendance issues.

Four foster parents attended the two scheduled focus group sessions, with two participants in each session. Given their effort to participate, I proceeded with the sessions. Although the original intention was to conduct focus groups to encourage interaction and facilitate the generation of data through shared experiences (Finch *et al.*, 2014), the circumstances led to the use of dyadic interviews. Dyadic interviews, which involve two participants, are also recognized as a valuable qualitative method, allowing participants to engage in dialogue, reflect on each other's experiences, and

provide rich, descriptive data (Morgan *et al.*, 2013; Morgan *et al.*, 2016; Topper & Bauermeister, 2021). In these two dyadic interviews, the foster parents shared detailed and insightful accounts of their experiences. Individual interviews were conducted with 11 foster parents. Among them, seven had youth who had dropped out of school, while eight had youth who had progressed to tertiary education. Given that some participants spoke IsiZulu, IsiZulu-speaking social workers assisted with the interviews.

The interviews began with gathering background information to understand the circumstances that resulted in the youth being placed in their care. I then explored the themes of the study, focusing on the education of the foster youth, using open-ended questions and probing techniques to gather in-depth insights. Throughout, I actively listened, encouraging the foster parents to share their experiences. They shared their experiences openly, including both positive and negative experiences of caring for the foster youth.

In concluding the sessions, I asked the foster parents to reflect on what they might have done differently and to offer advice to other foster parents. I also requested for permission to contact them if further clarity or information was needed.

Although the original plan was to conduct focus groups with foster parents, no focus groups were ultimately held due to low attendance. Instead, individual and dyadic interviews were conducted. While focus groups can foster interaction and generate data through shared experiences, qualitative research recognizes that rich, in-depth data can still be obtained through carefully conducted individual and dyadic interviews (Morgan *et al.*, 2013; Morgan *et al.*, 2016; Topper & Bauermeister, 2021).

While this shift reduced opportunities to observe group interactions; to ensure the depth and credibility of the data, I triangulated both methods (interviews, dyadic interviews, case file analysis) and sources (foster youth, foster parents, social workers). This triangulation enabled me to compare perspectives, validate findings, and capture multiple facets of participants' experiences, mitigating any potential limitations from not holding focus groups. Therefore, although the format differed from the initial plan, the combination of methodological rigor, participant engagement, and

multiple data sources ensured that the richness and trustworthiness of the data were maintained.

6.5.2.3 DATA COLLECTION WITH SOCIAL WORKERS

Focus group discussions were initially planned for the social workers. However, after consulting with my supervisors, we decided to enhance the data collection by conducting both focus group sessions and individual interviews. In total, I conducted two focus group sessions, one with five social workers and the other with eight, alongside five individual interviews. Additionally, I conducted a dyadic interview with two social workers who were unable to attend the focus groups but wished to participate in the study.

Recognizing my role as both a researcher and a manager to some of the social workers, I was mindful that they might be reluctant to share their experiences openly. To address this concern, all social workers were briefed on the study's purpose by their directors and managers before our initial discussions. They were given the opportunity to participate voluntarily as discussed previously.

The social workers were invited to two focus group discussions. Four social workers from the individual interviews also opted to join these sessions voluntarily. Two others who expressed interest were unable to attend on the scheduled dates and a separate discussion were arranged with them. In total, sixteen social workers participated in both focus group discussions and interviews.

During the discussions, I maintained a non-judgemental attitude, starting with general inquiries about their experience and knowledge, before exploring deeper into topics such as services to foster youth and their families as well as their roles in the foster youth's education. The environment was safe and conducive to open discussions, with the social workers freely sharing their perspectives, sometimes in agreement and other times in disagreement. The participants ranged in terms of the years of experience they had, and an interesting outcome was the diverse viewpoints on their role with respect to foster youth's education. The discussion progressed to a critical reflection on social workers' roles, ending with the challenges they faced and recommendations, both at practice and policy levels. There was a sense of

camaraderie among the social workers during these discussions, especially when sharing their challenges. Some of these challenges are unique to the NGO sector, particularly related to remuneration, benefits and terms of employment as opposed to social workers' employment by the state.

Acknowledging the potential for bias, I diligently maintained a research journal to document my experiences and regularly consulted with my supervisors throughout the process. The focus group discussions proved beneficial for the social workers, as they shared strategies and insights on how they coped with their challenges, while also sharing resources. Through this exchange they found mutual support and a realisation that they were not facing their struggles alone. The impression I gained was that social workers were eager to meet in this manner, where their insights were actively sought and they enjoyed the opportunity to engage in open conversations.

6.5.2.4 DATA COLLECTION FROM CASE FILES

Following the interviews with the foster youth, I examined their case files to gather additional information. I arranged with the participating organizations to access these files on their premises, due to the sensitive and confidential nature of the information they contained. The data helped me to create comprehensive profiles for the youth. I obtained additional data such as educational information, the role of the social worker, services rendered to the youth and their families, and interventions regarding the foster youth's educational outcomes. I was also able to identify documents relevant to the foster youth's education, such as school reports and requests for school fee exemptions.

The Information Guide for the Management of Statutory Services in terms of the Children's Act, 38 of 2005 includes Annexure 6, which comprises an audit form for statutory services, was utilised as a guide. This form outlines the essential information required in a statutory file, encompassing items such as intake forms, process notes, supervision records, pertinent life documents (e.g., identity, birth, and death certificates), official statutory documents (like court orders, reports, and extension orders), educational documents and details regarding therapeutic intervention and individual development and care plans (DSD, 2012).

All of the files contained official statutory and life documents. However, the quality of process recordings varied significantly, ranging from detailed notes with clear action plans to scanty recordings with minimal information. Although this was not the focus of the study, I recorded these differences and treated them as part of the context. This helped keep the data transparent and showed how recording practices affected the completeness and reliability of case information. While most files included school reports, they were not obtained regularly. Furthermore, there was limited information on therapeutic interventions aimed at helping foster youth cope with past and present trauma and limited services addressing the educational needs of foster youth. Most files contained care plans, albeit only one regardless of the duration of the foster youth's stay care. Some files did not contain care plans at all.

A few completed data extraction forms were submitted to the supervisors for review to ensure the relevant information was accurately extracted from the files. Based on their feedback, the forms were revised to enhance their comprehensiveness. This involved including additional details about the foster family, such as their sources of income and whether the placement was with a related or unrelated caregiver. It also captured more information on the child's health and any specialized services they received. Furthermore, the social worker's involvement was documented in greater detail, specifying the type and nature of interventions provided.

6.6 DATA ANALYSIS

The following discussion details the process of analysing the data collected through interviews, dyadic interviews and focus groups with 30 foster youth, 15 foster parents, and 16 social workers, as well as information obtained from case files.

Data analysis in qualitative research involves preparing and organising the data for analysis, simplifying it into themes through coding and presenting it in figures, tables or a narrative. Qualitative data analysis seeks to make sense of the data and to learn what it means (Creswell, 2013; Yegidis *et al.*, 2018).

In this study, data analysis was guided by Braun and Clark's (2006) thematic analysis which involves identifying, analysing and reporting themes within the data. The theme

highlights important aspects from the data relevant to the research questions, revealing patterns or meanings within the data.

6.6.1 TRANSCRIPTION AND FAMILIARISATION WITH THE DATA

Once the data collection is completed, the next step is the transcribing of the interviews. Silverman (2013) notes that while transcription is time-consuming, researchers must ensure that the transcription quality is not neglected as this may result in the researchers failing to show sufficient detail in the extracts from the interview data.

In this study, I personally transcribed 14 individual interviews and one focus group discussion. To ensure accuracy, I listened to the recording two times while reviewing the transcripts, verifying that no data was omitted. The remaining interviews and focus groups were transcribed by an external transcriber. I applied the same process of listening to the recordings and cross-checking the transcripts to confirm the accuracy of the data. This meticulous approach allowed me to thoroughly familiarize myself with the data, aligning with the recommendations of Braun and Clarke (2006). The repeated reading of the data helped me to search for meanings and patterns.

6.6.2 ANALYSING THE DATA

In using Braun and Clarke's (2006) method of thematic analysis, I identified key points of interest from the data, leading to the development of initial codes. This process was carried out manually, utilizing colour-coded highlighters and post-it notes to mark data segments. I also extracted specific portions of the data into a separate document to facilitate the coding process. After generating the initial codes, I organized them into potential themes using mind maps and tables, which allowed me to identify broader themes and sub-themes.

The next phase involved reviewing and refining these themes. I carefully examined all coded data extracts within each theme to determine if they formed coherent patterns. I then assessed the themes in relation to the entire dataset. This process deepened my understanding of the themes, the stories they conveyed, and their relationship to the data. Subsequently, I defined and named the themes, moving on to a more analytical stage. Throughout this process, I frequently referred to the research

questions to ensure that the identified themes and sub-themes were aligned with the study's aim and objectives.

The analysis write-up centred on the identified themes while aligning closely with the study's aim and objectives. Participants' voices were represented through rich, detailed descriptions, which were then supported by my interpretations and references to relevant literature.

The analysis process was extensive and labour-intensive due to the multiple data sources and collection methods. With a large volume of information to process, I continuously revisited the transcripts to make sure that I interpreted and represented the data accurately and captured all important elements. This process was guided by feedback from my supervisors, who consistently referred me to the data to ensure accuracy and integrity. Their input helped maintain an ethical approach to the analysis, an essential component of rigorous research (Babbie & Mouton, 2001; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Rubin & Babbie, 2017).

6.7 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical considerations in research encompass a range of concerns that must be carefully deliberated and addressed prior to initiating the study. This includes securing approval from the relevant research board, ensuring participants' voluntary involvement, obtaining written consent, safeguarding the anonymity and confidentiality of participants, preventing harm, and ensuring integrity in analysis and reporting (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). As noted above, ethical clearance for this study was obtained from the University of KwaZulu Natal, Humanities and Social Sciences Research Committee – Protocol reference number: HSSREC/00003523/2021. Below is a discussion of the ethical considerations in this study.

6.7.1 VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Voluntary participation is essential in research, especially since it often requires individuals to share personal information to strangers (Babbie and Mouton, 2001; Rubin and Babbie, 2017). No one should be forced to participate; participants must be fully informed of their involvement in study and consent to participate (Neuman, 2007;

Rubin & Babbie, 2017) and the language proficiency of the participants must be considered (Yegidis *et al.*, 2018).

In this study, participants were recruited by their social workers who assured them that their participation was voluntary. I reiterated voluntary participation when I met the participants. They were provided with full information about the research and assured that their participation was entirely optional, with the freedom to withdraw at any stage without consequences.

6.7.2 INFORMED WRITTEN CONSENT

Informed consent is central to any research study. Once participants have been briefed on the study, and have willingly agreed to participate; they would need to complete a written consent form (Neuman, 2007; Rubin & Babbie, 2017; Webster, *et al.*, 2014). The written consent form should provide all the information of the study including potential harm, anonymity and confidentiality. In obtaining consent, the researcher needs to consider the language and cultural needs of the population under study and ensure that the consent forms are available in the participant's native language to uphold the social work value of self-determination (Yegidis *et al.*, 2018), and to ensure that no element of deception is entailed in the research process (Rubin & Babbie, 2017).

In this study, the informed consent forms were translated into IsiZulu and were duly completed by all participating individuals.

6.7.3 ANONYMITY

Ensuring the privacy of participants is crucial in research, involving protecting their identities (Neuman, 2007; Rubin & Babbie, 2017). This involves separating participants' identities from their responses and maintaining anonymity throughout the study. To achieve this, participants in this study were allocated pseudonyms, thus protecting their true identity (Creswell, 2013; Neuman, 2007).

6.7.4 CONFIDENTIALITY

All participants were assured that their responses would be treated with utmost confidentiality. They were informed of the steps taken to safeguard their privacy,

including situations where a participant's well-being might be at risk (Rubin & Babbie, 2017; Yegidis *et al.*, 2018). Webster *et al.* (2014) note that maintaining confidentiality can be challenging in focus group settings. This was addressed with the participants who agreed not to divulge any information shared within the group. Social workers who assisted with recruitment and interpretation adhered to the ethical guidelines of the profession as outlined in the SACSSP Code of Conduct and Ethics. In addition, the transcriber signed a confidentiality pledge prior to commencing the transcription process.

6.7.5 NO HARM TO THE PARTICIPANTS

Social research must never cause harm to its participants. While psychological harm remains a potential risk, researchers are responsible for identifying potential risks and ensuring the well-being of participants. Sometimes participants are asked to reveal deviant behaviours, unpopular attitudes, or personal traits that they may find demeaning, adding to their discomfort. Moreover, participants may become aware of aspects of themselves that were previously unknown. The researcher needs to be sensitive to this and make every effort to protect the participants (Babbie & Mouton, 2001; Rubin & Babbie; 2016, 2017). Webster *et al.* (2014) assert that to prevent undue intrusion in research endeavours, researchers must assess the value of their study and make sure that their approach aligns with the study's objectives. Given that qualitative research involves emotive and distressing topics, the researcher must give careful thought to what they really need to know from the participants, thereby protecting them from undue intrusion. Yegidis *et al.* (2018) point out that it is important for researchers to acknowledge that any study involving human participants carries inherent risks of harm. Therefore, they must ensure the availability of counselling or other supportive services to address any potential adverse effects on participants.

In this study, some participants were youth who had been in or were in foster care and may have experienced trauma or loss. While the research focused on investigating the educational outcomes of foster youth, some interview questions may have inadvertently induced stress. As a qualified social worker, on-site support was provided to those participants who experienced distress during the interviews. Subsequently, participants were referred for further counselling if deemed necessary. It is acknowledged that many foster children had encountered traumatic life events,

rendering them vulnerable and often placed in unequal relationships, such as those with social workers, which typically lacked egalitarianism. As a qualified social worker registered with the South African Council for Social Services Profession, adherence to the Code of Ethics informed my relationship with the participants. Basic social work skills were employed to establish rapport with the youth, fostering an environment conducive to open and free expression of their experiences within a safe setting.

6.8 TRUSTWORTHINESS OF THE STUDY

Padgett (2017) emphasizes that a trustworthy study is one conducted with fairness and ethical rigour, accurately reflecting the participants' experiences. Trustworthiness in qualitative research is explored through various perspectives and terminologies. One widely recognized approach is that of Lincoln and Guba (1985), who propose the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to evaluate trustworthiness in qualitative studies, as endorsed by scholars such as Babbie & Mouton (2001), Creswell (2013), Lewis *et al.*, (2014) and Padgett (2017).

6.8.1 CREDIBILITY

Several strategies exist for ensuring the "accuracy" of a qualitative study (Creswell, 2013). In this study, credibility was strengthened by using multiple sources and data collection methods, providing corroborating evidence from diverse perspectives to deepen understanding of the topic. Data were gathered from foster youth, their foster parents, and social workers via interviews and focus group discussions. Additionally, case file analyses were conducted. This triangulation of sources and methods strengthened the study's credibility (Creswell, 2013; Lewis *et al.*, 2014).

Another strategy for establishing credibility was maintaining a comprehensive "audit trail" (Babbie, 2016). Every step of the research process was documented in a research journal, including submitting and refining the proposal, obtaining feedback, and piloting research instruments to ensure alignment with the study's aim and objectives. Audio recordings, transcripts, and notes from interviews and focus groups were preserved for reference. Regular supervision by two supervisors further ensured rigor, as they critically examined the methods, interpretations, and conclusions. These feedback sessions were documented and occasionally recorded to facilitate review. I

also engaged in discussions with my colleagues and other experts in the field to ensure that I followed the research process meticulously to maintain the integrity of the study (Creswell, 2013).

Clarifying researcher bias was also integral to establishing credibility. From the outset, I acknowledged my experiences and professional role, regularly engaging in self-reflection to mitigate potential bias (Clemens *et al.*, 2017; Creswell, 2013; Johnson *et al.*, 2020). Supervisors played a crucial role in scrutinizing my work to ensure that I worked diligently to undertake this study with cognisance of my role in the field of child protection. My professional experience as a social worker, allowed me to connect with participants with warmth, empathy, and genuineness, fostering an environment where they felt comfortable sharing their experiences openly.

6.8.2 TRANSFERABILITY

Transferability is the extent to which the findings of a study can be applied to other contexts or situations (Babbie & Mouton, 2001; Shenton, 2004). To support transferability, I provided detailed background information to establish the study's context and offered comprehensive descriptions of the phenomena under investigation, enabling readers to make informed comparisons. Detailed notes were taken from case records, and the interviews and focus group discussions were observed, recorded, and fully transcribed. During analysis, I repeatedly reviewed the transcriptions to ensure accurate coding and representation of the data. Rich, thick descriptions of the findings were included to allow readers to evaluate the applicability of the study to other settings (Babbie & Mouton, 2001; Creswell, 2013).

Additionally, purposive sampling, identified by Babbie and Mouton (2001) as a method for enhancing transferability, was employed in this study. Participants were selected specifically for their ability to provide valuable insights into the educational outcomes of foster youth. This deliberate approach ensured that the findings were grounded in relevant and meaningful data, further supporting the potential transferability of the study.

6.8.3 DEPENDABILITY

Dependability refers to the reliability of findings, ensuring they would remain the same if the study were replicated with the same participants using the same methodology (Babbie & Mouton, 2001; Shenton, 2004). To enhance dependability, detailed documentation of the research design and implementation was provided, including a thorough explanation of the methodological approach, research methods, and instruments used. The process of data collection was clearly outlined to offer transparency and allow for potential replication. In addition, the “overlapping” of data-collection techniques such as interviews and focus groups, as discussed above, was employed (Shenton, 2004).

A reflective journal was maintained throughout the study, enabling ongoing self-assessment and critical reflection. Regular engagement with the supervisors ensured that the research process remained aligned with the study’s aim and objectives. (Shenton, 2004). Additionally, an audit trail was established, documenting every aspect of the study comprehensively. This record serves as evidence of the processes followed and further substantiates the dependability of the research.

6.8.4 CONFIRMABILITY

Confirmability refers to the objectivity of the study, ensuring that the findings are shaped by the focus of the research, rather than the researcher’s biases (Babbie & Mouton, 2001; Shenton, 2004). To enhance confirmability, triangulation of methods and sources was utilised to minimize the influence of researcher bias. Additionally, qualitative research requires the researcher to critically reflect on their role in the study and how their background, experiences, and perspectives may shape their interpretations. Factors such as the themes identified, the meanings ascribed to the data, and the overall direction of the study can be influenced by the researcher’s own experiences and cultural context (Creswell, 2014; Johnson *et al.*, 2020).

In this study, I remained highly conscious of these potential influences and allowed the data to guide the findings to ensure accurate and authentic reporting. Regular reporting to my supervisors provided further oversight, ensuring that the study remained credible with efforts to minimise bias. All aspects of the research process

were meticulously documented and are available for review to confirm the study's objectivity. Reflexivity, an essential aspect of confirmability, is discussed in further detail below.

6.9 REFLEXIVITY

Elicor (2022) emphasizes that an ethical approach to research requires researchers to engage in self-reflexivity, examining their biases and how these may influence their research. Reflexivity goes beyond merely adhering to ethical guidelines; it involves a deep awareness of the power dynamics within the research context. The concept of conscious partiality is particularly relevant as it urges researchers to consider "views from below" and amplify the voices of marginalized or oppressed individuals (Elicor, 2022; Varga-Doba, 2012).

In this study, deliberate efforts were made to prioritize the voices of foster youth. At the outset, all participants were transparently informed about the study's aim and objectives and assured that their responses were vital for shaping recommendations to improve the FCS. Participants were encouraged to openly share their challenges without fear of repercussions, creating an environment of trust and openness.

Reflexivity also requires researchers to critically examine their own biases and assumptions throughout the research process, including how personal experiences and perspectives may shape the research focus, participants' responses, and the interpretation of data (Rubin & Babbie, 2017). I was particularly aware of my dual role as both a researcher and a manager in one of the participating organizations. Acknowledging this helped me remain conscious of how participants might perceive me and how these perceptions could influence their responses, including the possibility of providing "favourable responses" due to my managerial position. To manage these dynamics, I maintained a reflexive journal to document my thoughts, emotions, and potential biases throughout the study and sought regular guidance from my supervisors to identify and address any emerging biases.

Throughout the research, I noted the emotional impact of my study; how difficult it was when foster youth became distressed, my anxiety when foster parents were unable to attend focus groups, and the tediousness of transcribing interviews. I also reflected on

my fears of facilitating discussions with social workers and the weight of listening to painful stories while trying to remain objective. At times, these experiences left me feeling overwhelmed, but journaling and regular debriefing sessions with my supervisors allowed me to process my emotions, cope with the challenges, and stay grounded in the research.

Padgett (2017) highlights that in addition to being reflexive, qualitative researchers must remain flexible and adaptable to unforeseen challenges in the field. Flexibility is essential, as participants may refuse to cooperate, fail to attend scheduled sessions or disclose unexpected and sensitive information. Researchers must adapt to these circumstances rather than attempting to rigidly control the process. In this study, flexibility was crucial. For example, when foster parents were unable to attend the planned focus group discussions, I conducted individual interviews instead. This decision was made in consultation with the supervisors to ensure that the approach remained aligned with the overall aims and objectives of the study. Similarly, I expanded the recruitment criteria for foster youth when initial recruitment efforts proved challenging. Furthermore, I faced difficulties transcribing the data on my own and enlisted the assistance of an external transcriber. Throughout the study, I managed multiple aspects of the research process simultaneously, including reviewing the literature, collecting data, and transcribing interviews. To ensure the integrity of the process and prevent the loss of important information, I maintained a detailed record of all research activities.

By engaging in reflexivity, conscious partiality, and maintaining flexibility, I aimed to conduct a study that is ethically sound, inclusive, and sensitive to the lived experiences of all participants.

6.10 LIMITATIONS

Limitations were identified during the research process and are discussed below:

- ✓ I am a social work manager at one of the organisations that participated in the study. There was a possibility that the social workers, foster youth and foster parents may not have wanted to share openly for fear of negative consequences. To mitigate against this, I included three other CPOs to participate in the study, so there were different sources of information as well

as different data collection methods such as focus group discussions, interviews and the analysis of case files.

- ✓ Participants may have occasionally presented themselves in a favourable light out of concern for potential repercussions. However, the use of triangulation, incorporating multiple data sources and methods of data collection, helped to provide a more comprehensive and balanced perspective
- ✓ I have worked in the child protection field for over 29 years and have managed the foster care programme at my organization for 20 years. I was conscious of researcher bias and kept a journal to reflect my thoughts and feelings to guard against bias. In addition, I was in regular consultations with my supervisors to keep me focused on the study.
- ✓ I am English speaking and some of the interviews and focus group discussions were conducted through interpreters, and some data may have been lost. However, the interviews were tape-recorded and comprehensive notes were taken during the interviews and the focus group discussions.
- ✓ This study was conducted in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal, with participants drawn from four CPOs. As a result, the sample size was relatively small, limiting the ability to make generalizations. However, generalization was not the study's objective. Instead, the goal was to understand and interpret the data within its specific context, offering insights that may resonate with similar foster care environments.

6.11 CONCLUSION

The research methodology was discussed in this chapter, aligning it with the study's aim and objectives. The chosen research paradigm and design were examined, along with an exploration of sampling strategies, data collection methods, and data analysis techniques. Ethical considerations, trustworthiness, and the study limitations were also addressed. The following chapter provides a detailed analysis of the data, incorporating participants' perspectives and contextualizing the findings within relevant literature.

SECTION FOUR: RESULTS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This section presents the research findings related to the study's main aim and objectives. The analysis represents the voices of foster youth who transitioned to tertiary education and those who did not complete school, their foster parents and social workers, and data obtained from an a comprehensive and detailed study of the case files. With the use of triangulation, I present the findings collectively across multiple data sources. These are analysed within the context of the literature available, the theoretical frameworks that underpin the study and my interpretations and reflections.

The participants' responses are presented in italics, with pseudonyms assigned to protect their identities. Foster youth are categorized as either "post-secondary students" or "school leavers" to differentiate their educational outcomes. Additionally, a distinction is made between related foster parents and unrelated foster parents

Chapter seven presents the demographic information of the participants followed by an analysis and discussion of the experiences of foster youth and their interactions with the social worker. Chapter eight provides insight into the factors that contribute to and impede the attainment of positive educational outcomes. Chapter nine presents the major conclusions followed by recommendations.

CHAPTER SEVEN

DEMOGRAPHICS OF THE PARTICIPANTS AND LIFE EXPERIENCES OF FOSTER YOUTH

This chapter begins with demographic data on all the study participants, followed by an examination of the life experiences of foster youth and their interactions with their social workers.

7.1 DEMOGRAPHICS OF THE PARTICIPANTS

TABLE 1: DEMOGRAPHICS OF THE FOSTER YOUTH, N = 30

NO.	NAME	AGE AND GENDER	RACE	SIBLINGS	REASONS FOR PLACEMENT	RELATED OR UNRELATED	NUMBER OF PLACEMENTS	YEARS IN FOSTER CARE	CURRENT STATUS OF YOUTH
1.	Anele	21 years Female	Black	3 – placed in foster care with siblings	Orphan	Related (aunt)	1	13 years	Post-secondary student (University – National Student Financial Scheme (NSFAS) funded)
2.	Themba	21 years Male	Black	0	Orphan	Unrelated (foster mother)	1	14 years	Post-secondary student (University of Technology – NSFAS funded)
3.	Pamela	23 years Female	Black	0	Orphan	Related (aunt)	2	5 years	Post-secondary student (University – NSFAS funded)
4.	Susan	20 years Female	Indian	1 – placed in foster care with sibling	Orphan	Related (grandmother)	1	11 years	Post-secondary student (University – NSFAS funded)
5.	Angel	22 years Female	Black	1	Orphan	Unrelated (foster mother)	1	3 years	Post-secondary student (University – NSFAS funded)
6.	Lusanda	21 years Female	Black	0	Maternal orphan	Related (grandmother)	1	9 years	Post-secondary student (University – NSFAS funded)

7.	Mavis	24 years Female	Black	4 – placed in foster care with three siblings	Maternal orphan	Related (grandmother)	1	5 years	Post-secondary student (Technical Vocational Education Training – self funded)
8.	Siya	24 years Male	Black	1	Maternal orphan	Related (sister)	1	3 years	Post-secondary student (University of Technology – NSFAS funded)
9.	Ntombi	22 years Female	Black	2 – placed in foster care with one sibling	Maternal orphan	Related (grandmother)	1	11 years	Post-secondary student Technical Vocational Education Training – NSFAS funded)
10.	Samkelo	24 years Male	Black	1 – placed in foster care with sibling	Maternal orphan	Related (aunt)	3	12 years	Post-secondary student (University – NSFAS funded)
11.	Mandisa	22 years Female	Black	1 – placed in foster care with sibling	Paternal orphan and abandoned by the mother	Related (grandmother)	1	15 years	Post-secondary student (University – NSFAS funded)
12.	Ntokozo	20 years Female	Black	0	Paternal orphan and abandoned by the mother	Related (grandmother)	1	6 years	Post-secondary student (University of Technology – NSFAS funded)
13.	Mason	22 years Male	Coloured	0	Neglect	Related (aunt)	1	16 years	Post-secondary student (Private college)
14.	Thobeka	24 years Female	Black	0	Abandoned	Unrelated (foster mother)	1	18 years	Post-secondary student (Technical Vocational Education Training – self funded)
15.	Hellen	22 years Female	Indian	1	Abandoned	Related (grandmother)	1	14 years	Post-secondary student (University – NSFAS funded)
16.	Pearl	20 years Female	Black	2	Orphan	Related (aunt)	1	6 years	School leaver in Grade 12

17.	Ayanda	22 years Female	Black	2	Orphan	Related (grandmother)	1	12 years	School leaver in Grade 11
18.	Bandile	19 years Male	Black	2	Maternal orphan	Related (grandmother)	2	5 years	School leaver in Grade 9
19.	Asanda	23 years Female	Black	0	Maternal orphan	Related (grandmother)	1	15 years	School leaver in Grade 12
20.	Senzo	21 years Male	Black	4	Maternal orphan	Related (uncle)	1	12 years	School leaver in Grade 8
21.	Wanda	25 years Male	Black	1 – placed in foster care with sibling	Maternal orphan	Related (sister)	3	15 years	School leaver in Grade 10
22.	John	19 years Male	Coloured	0	Maternal orphan	Related (grandmother)	1	12 years	School leaver in Grade 9
23.	Kwanele	23 years Male	Black	6 – placed in foster care with one sibling	Maternal orphan	Related (grandmother)	1	7 years	School leaver in Grade 11
24.	Summer	20 years Female	Indian	1	Neglect and sexual abuse	Related (uncle)	2	12 years	School leaver in Grade 8
25.	Mark	23 years Male	Coloured	4 – placed in foster care with three siblings	Neglect	Unrelated (foster mother)	1	10 years	School leaver in Grade 10
26.	Andiswa	20 years Female	African	4 – placed in foster care with siblings	Neglect	Unrelated (foster mother)	1	12 years	School leaver in Grade 10
27.	Amy	25 years Female	Coloured	1 – placed in foster care with sibling	Neglect and sexual abuse	Related (sister)	2	15 years	School leaver in Grade 10
28.	Akhona	20 years Female	Black	0	Abandoned	Unrelated (foster mother)	1	17 years	School leaver in Grade 12
29.	Minenhle	25 years Female	Black	2	Abandoned	Related (grandmother)	2	19 years	School leaver in Grade 10
30.	Olwethu	23 years Male	Black	1 – placed in foster care with sibling	Abandoned	Related (aunt)	1	4 years	School leaver in Grade 12

Table 1 provides details on the youth participants whose ages spanned from 19 to 25 years. Among the 30 participants, 18 were aged between 19 and 22 years, while the remaining 12 were between the ages of 23 and 25 years.

The study had a higher number of female youth participants, who comprised 63% of the total, compared to 37% of male participants. Similarly, research in South Africa by Mampane and Ross (2017); Pretorius and Ross (2010) and Van der Westhuizen *et al.* (2012) with foster children, also had more female than male participants. Studies by Dhludlu (2021) with youth leaving care and Moodley (2020) with youth exiting child and youth care centres likewise reflected a higher number of female participants. Nationally, there are 136,918 females and 133,405 males in foster care, indicating a higher number of females across the country. Contrastingly, in KwaZulu-Natal, the distribution is nearly equal, with 23,355 males and 23,289 females (SASSA, 2024). As participants were given the option to take part in the study, it is possible that female participants were more willing to share their experiences.

Black youth comprised 77% of the participants, with 13% Coloured and 10% Indian. Chapter two examined the consequences of Apartheid, the disintegration of Black families due to poverty and HIV and the increased vulnerabilities of children. These factors may have contributed more Black youth being placed in foster care. It must be noted that in KwaZulu Natal, Black Africans constitute 83% of the population; Indians 7% and Coloureds only 1%. According to the census 2022 data, nationally, Black Africans constitute 81.4% of the population; Coloureds, 8.2%, Whites 7.3%; and Indians/Asians, 2.7% (SA News, 2023).

One or both of the parents of twenty of the youth were deceased, while the whereabouts of the parents of the other youth were unknown. In three instances, both biological parents' whereabouts were known. Many of the youth had siblings, and twelve of the youth were placed in foster care with their siblings.

Table 1 reflects that in pursuing higher education, universities were the most common choice for the post-secondary student. The NSFAS funding played an important role in supporting the foster youth, making education accessible to many who might not afford it otherwise.

Table 1 also illustrates the majority of youth left school between grades 10 to 12. These findings align with Mokoena's (2019) study of 12 adolescents, which reported dropouts from grades 9 to 12. Hartnack (2017) and Spaul (2015) also noted that most school dropouts occurred in Grades 10 and 11. However, they contrast with Weybright *et al.* (2017), who found the highest dropout rate in grade 9, attributing this to learners completing grade 9 having the opportunity to pursue other study options. It might also be related to the education being mandatory for all children in South Africa between the ages of 7 and 15 years.

TABLE 2: DEMOGRAPHICS OF THE FOSTER PARENTS, N = 15

NO.	NAME	AGE AND GENDER	RACE	LEVEL OF EDUCATION	OCCUPATION	SOURCES OF INCOME	APPROXIMATE INCOME ACCORDING TO THE FOSTER PARENT	YOUTH IN HER CARE	RELATED/UNRELATED PLACEMENT
1.	Mrs Mkhize	59 years Female	African	Grade 11	Unemployed	Husband's pension and foster care grant (FCG)	R 3000	Lusanda (post-secondary student)	Related
2.	Mrs Gumede	72 years Female	African	Grade 12	Pensioner	State old age pension (OAP) and FCG	R 3000	Ntokozo (post-secondary student)	Related
3.	Mrs Smith	73 years Female	Indian	Nursing qualification	Pensioner	OAP and FCG	R 3000	Susan (post-secondary student)	Related
4.	Mrs Ngcobo	61 years Female	African	Grade 9	Self-employed as a street vendor	Social Relief of Distres grant, income from street vending and FCG	R 1400	Pamela (post-secondary student)	Related
5.	Mrs Sibisi	69 years Female	African	Grade 4	Pensioner	OAP and FCG	R 3000	Mavis (post-secondary student)	Related
6.	Mrs Mjwara	52 years Female	African	Master's Degree in Education	Educator	Salary	R 31000	Samkelo (post-secondary student)	Related
7.	Mrs Kunene	64 years Female	African	Grade 6	Pensioner	OAP and FCG	R 3000	Anele (post-secondary student)	Related

8.	Ms Nxumalo	41 years Female	African	Grade 11	Unemployed	Rental income, FCG and child support grant	R 4000	Themba (post-secondary student)	Unrelated
9.	Mrs Dlamini	82 years Female	African	No formal education	Pensioner	OAP	R 2000	Ayanda (school leaver)	Related
10.	Ms Chiya	33 years Female	African	Grade 12	Unemployed	Social Relief of Distress Grant	R 350	Wanda (school leaver)	Related
11.	Ms Mchunu	47 years Female	African	Grade 12	Front-shop assistant	Salary	R 7000	Olwethu (school leaver)	Related
12.	Mrs Sibiya	53 years Female	African	Grade 12	Unemployed	Supported by her husband	R 20000 (partner's income)	Bandile (school leaver)	Related
13.	Mrs Duma	77 years Female	African	Grade 12	Pensioner	OAP and FCG	R 7700	Akhona (school leaver)	Unrelated
14.	Mrs Mhlongo	62 years Female	African	Grade 7	Pensioner	Business income and FCG	R 4500	Andiswa (school leaver)	Unrelated
15	Mrs John	68 years Female	Coloured	Level 4 - ECD	Self-employed – owns a creche	Business income and FCG	R 20000	Mark (school leaver)	Unrelated

The above table illustrates that all the foster parents who were part of the study were female, the majority were older and predominantly Black. Seven related foster parents were caring for post-secondary students, while one unrelated foster parent was also caring for a post-secondary student. Additionally, four related foster parents were caring for school leavers, and three unrelated foster parents were caring for school leavers.

One foster parent had never attended school. Three foster parents had primary school education, while eight had secondary school education. Additionally, three foster parents held tertiary qualifications. Table 2 indicates no clear correlation between the educational levels of foster parents and the educational status of foster youth. Notably, only one foster parent, whose foster youth dropped out of school, had no formal education.

Six of the foster parents were pensioners, and three were unemployed. Three were self-employed, and another three were in formal employment. Most foster parents were dependent on state social grants, including the old age, foster care, Social Relief of Distress and child support grants for income, while one was financially dependent on her partner.

TABLE 3: DEMOGRAPHICS OF THE SOCIAL WORKERS, N = 16

NO.	NAME	AGE AND GENDER	QUALIFICATION	YEARS OF EXEPERIENCE	TOTAL CASELOAD
1.	Enhle	40 years Female	BSW	5 years	140 (Foster care cases)
2.	Amahle	33 years Female	BSW	5 years	123 (Foster care cases)
3.	Fikile	48 years Female	BSW	5 years	140 (Foster care cases)
4.	Mandy	35 years Female	BA (Social Work)	13 years	66 (Foster care and generic cases)
5.	Joanne	46 years Female	BA (Social Work) Honours (Policy and Developmental Studies)	18 years	63 (Foster care and generic cases)
6.	Busani	31 years Female	BSW	4 years	89 (Foster care cases)
7.	Sphila	32 years Female	BSW	5 years	69 (Foster care cases)
8.	Thandi	36 years Female	BSW	3 years	99 (Foster care and generic cases)
9.	Thabile	41 years Female	BA (Social Work) Honours (Policy and Developmental Studies)	13 years	61 (Adoption and foster care cases)
10.	Joey	34 years Male	BSW	9 years	110 (Foster care cases)
11.	Allan	36 years Male	BSW	6 years	148 (Foster care cases)
12.	Okuhle	32 years Female	BSW	3 years	770 (Foster care cases)
13.	Buhle	34 years Female	BSW	4 years	600 (Foster care cases)
14.	Unathi	40 years Female	BSW	5 years	66 (Foster care and generic cases)
15.	Aphiwe	37 years Female	BA (Social Work) Honours (Policy and Developmental Studies)	5 years	81 (Foster care and generic cases)
16.	Kholeka	50 years Female	BSW	13 years	85 (Foster care and generic cases)

The above table reflects that all the social workers who were part of the study were aged over thirty. There were only two male participants in the study. Each social worker held either a four-year Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) or a Bachelor of Arts (BA) in Social Work as is required by law in South Africa, with only three possessing an additional qualification, which was an Honours degree in Policy and Developmental Studies. Their overall experience as social workers varied from three to eighteen years, while their specific involvement in foster care ranged from three to fifteen years.

Most participants had over five years of experience, with many having worked only in foster care.

All but one social worker had been employed at their current organization for three years or more. This suggests stability among the social workers and indicates low staff turnover at the organizations in the recent years.

Table 3 reflects that nine social workers exclusively handled foster care cases, while the remaining seven managed both foster care and generic cases. The caseloads varied significantly among the social workers, with two individuals handling exceptionally high caseloads of 600 and 770 cases each. Notably, every social worker had caseloads exceeding the DSD's (2011) recommended norm of 60 cases per social worker, indicating systemic overburdening.

7.2 THEME: LIFE EXPERIENCES OF FOSTER YOUTH

This section details the experiences of the foster youth with thick description of data, representing the voices of the participants.

7.2.1 GETTING INTO CARE

Understanding the reasons contributing to youth being placed in foster care was explored through interviews with them and their foster parents and focus groups and interviews with their social workers, and an analysis of case files. Three primary findings for the placement of youth in foster care emerged; orphanhood, abandonment, and child abuse and neglect.

7.2.1.1 ORPHANHOOD

The review of the case files revealed that the predominant factor for the placement of youth in foster care is the death of their parents. Seven youth entered foster care after both their parents passed away, while eleven were placed due to the death of their mothers and being abandoned by their fathers. Two youth entered foster care after being abandoned by their mothers and the death of their fathers. From the interviews, sixteen foster youth related that they were placed in care after their parents passed away. Ntombi, a post-secondary student related, "*I think it is because I don't have both*

parents, my parents died". A study by Lesea (2017) echoes these findings, revealing that participants reported entering foster care after the death of one or both parents.

Eight foster parents assumed responsibility for the youth due to the death of their parents. For instance, Mrs. Smith, a maternal grandmother, described her experience,

I gave up my whole life to take care of the children. I sacrificed a lot...self-sacrifice, sacrifice. I was homebound; that was my sacrifice.

Despite frequently using the term "sacrifice," Mrs. Smith did not view caring for her grandchildren as a burden. Mrs Sibisi, another maternal grandmother, related that she assumed responsibility for her four grandchildren following the death of her daughter. Mrs Sibisi shared, *"it was very hard because at that time I was not even getting my pension. I was a domestic worker, it was hard, buying all the stuff. I was getting paid R1500 a month"*. Mrs Smith and Mrs Sibisi are just two examples of grandparents who willingly changed their lives to provide stability and security for their grandchildren. While the invaluable role of grandparents must be acknowledged, it placed a significant burden on them as they were already dealing with their own financial and health challenges. This aligns with research by Alpaslan and Mabutho (2005), Perumal (2011) and Schatz (2007), which found that grandmothers remained committed to their grandchildren despite personal losses, poor health, and financial challenges. However, when viewed through the lens of the capability approach, these placements can also limit children's opportunities to fully flourish, since caregivers' constrained resources may restrict access to essential capabilities identified by Nussbaum (2011), including health, social affiliation, and control over their environment.

Similarly, Mrs Kunene, another related foster parent, shared that she and her husband assumed responsibility for his brother's four children, *"I had to take all of the four children and I had six children. There were family issues because now I had ten children, and the rest of the family from my husband's side were not willing to help with the four kids."* Ms. Nxumalo, an unrelated foster parent shared, *"the mother was very sick, she appointed me to look after the child"*. These stories reveal the deep sense of duty and commitment felt by family members and friends who often step in to offer support and stability for children not residing with of their biological parents. While this

is laudable, critical theorists raise questions about placing the burden of responsibility of child-rearing onto poor Black women, with a further entrenchment of the feminization of poverty, while men, particularly in patriarchal societies “often renege even on expected gendered roles” (Seepamore & Sewpaul, 2021, p. 70).

The severe impact of HIV/AIDS on families and children, globally and in South Africa, leading to numerous children being orphaned has been noted (Hall, 2022b; Meintjies *et al.*, 2006; UNICEF, 2005). South Africa's former Minister of Social Development, Zola Skweyiya, encouraged relatives to access the foster care grants to help support orphaned children (Hall *et al.*, 2016). Similarly, studies by Perumal (2011), Pretorius and Ross (2010) and Schiller (2015) also observed an increase in foster placements due to orphanhood. Consistent with these studies, the findings of this research reveal that orphanhood has emerged as a leading factor contributing to children’s placement in foster care.

7.2.1.2 ABANDONMENT

Five youth entered foster care due to abandonment by both parents. Hellen, a post-secondary student recalls, “*ok, so it was told to me that my mum, she wasn’t up to any good at that time, she’s been back and forth, running away from home to Joburg so my granny took care of me from then*”. Hellen was uncomfortable discussing her parents, suggesting that this still troubled her. Minenhle, a school leaver similarly shared “*my mother abandoned me. She gave birth in Johannesburg and my granny go and look for me. She found me and she raised me*”. Minenhle was visibly upset during the interview, indicating that this was a sensitive issue for her.

In South Africa, Blackie (2014) and Rosenberg (2020) note a concerning rise in the incidence of child abandonment. Poverty, substance abuse, and a lack of support contribute to child abandonment (Hammed *et al.*, 2020). Studies by Dhludhlu (2021) and Moodley (2020) echo these findings, with participants recounting their own experiences of parental abandonment.

In discussing the reasons for their placements in foster care, the non-existent roles of biological fathers were obvious. For example, Hellen and Minenhle exclusively mentioned the abandonment they experienced from their mothers, without any reference to their fathers. Similarly, Andiswa shared that she was neglected by her

mother. The absence of fathers emerged as a recurring theme, suggesting fathers had little to no presence in their lives, with this phenomenon being normalized in the South African context.

Patel and Mavungu (2016) and Richter (2006) assert that many South African fathers are not involved in their children's lives. Seepamore (2018) notes that in South Africa, over 50% of children are brought up by their mothers, with fathers not being involved. The migrant labour system and the legacy of Apartheid policies forced men to live away from their families, limiting their role in childcare (Budlender & Lund, 2011; Hall & Richter, 2018; Mokomane, 2014; Mtshali, 2015). Additionally, the rise in single-parent families, resulting from pregnancies out of marriage and divorce, contributed to this trend (Amoateng *et al.*, 2004; Bigombe & Khadiagala, 2003; Jacobs, 2023; Erasmus & Raniga, 2025), once again revealing gender inequalities and the reliance on women to care for children (Hall & Richter, 2018). Studies by Dhludhlu (2021) and Moodley (2020) similarly found that youth in alternative care reported a lack of paternal involvement in their lives. Viewed from a critical theory perspective, child abandonment is not simply parental failure but reflects broader structural inequalities, including poverty, the legacy of apartheid, and gendered caregiving expectations, which shape both parental capacity and children's well-being.

7.2.1.3 CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

Neglect was a precipitating factor for five youth entering foster care, with two of these being accompanied by sexual abuse. International and South African studies show the correlation between child abuse, neglect, and the necessity for children entering alternative care (Dhudhlu, 2021; Moodley *et al.*, 2018; Morton, 2015a; Palmieri & La Salle, 2016).

Summer, a school leaver emotionally shared,

When I was small I always thought my mother didn't want me, that's why I had to go and stay with my aunty. She was married at that time and her husband used to abuse her and sometimes he used to hit me too. So, my uncle wanted to keep me safe and I had to stay with them, and not my mother.

The records in the case file reflected that Summer was allegedly sexually abused by her stepfather, which her mother did not believe. Summer struggled with a sense of guilt, blaming herself, as her relationship with her mother was poor and did not improve over the years.

Mark became emotional as he recounted how their parents were unable to provide care for him and his siblings. Expressing a sense of confusion about their circumstances, he felt he had been uprooted without any clear explanation suggesting a lack of consultation regarding their care. Andiswa, a school leaver shared her experiences of being neglected,

The reason is because the biological mother was neglecting us and we were not having the stable home to stay.

Mrs. Mhlongo shared that her foster child was placed in her care after experiencing neglect and eventual abandonment, along with her siblings. Parental substance abuse further contributed to these challenges, compromising the quality of care and leading to family dysfunction, maltreatment, and neglect resonating with studies by Laslett *et al.* (2013), Meyer *et al.* (2010) and Naicker *et al.* (2021) who reported that alcohol abuse disrupts family functioning, creates conflict, increases social isolation, and places additional financial strain on already vulnerable families.

Although South African legislation and the Constitution outline protective measures for children, they continue to experience abuse, abandonment, and neglect. This ongoing issue was also found in studies by Dhludhlu (2021) and Moodley (2020). A major precursor to child abandonment and neglect is poverty, which with its colonial and Apartheid roots in South Africa, has been exacerbated by post-apartheid neoliberal policies. Sewpaul (2020), a critical theorist, asserts that within the neoliberal paradigm, “the dominant discourse is on individuals and families being dysfunctional and broken and in need of fixing! It is easier to blame the person, rather than acknowledge the dysfunctional societies that individuals and families are embedded in. We speak not of broken and dysfunctional societies, but of dysfunctional individuals and families” (p. 66).

Apart from pushing children into the care system, neoliberal practices also negatively impact social services available to them once they are in alternative care. The state is

responsible for protecting children and strengthening families to prevent such placements. The care and protection of children falls under the DSD and CPOs which operate as NPOs. However, DSD has historically provided limited funding to the NPO sector, hindering its ability to offer developmental social work services, especially early intervention and prevention programmes (Skhosana, 2020; Strydom, 2010). Recently, reports from GroundUp, News24, and the Daily Maverick revealed severe funding cuts by DSD, exacerbating the vulnerability of children (De Klerk, 2024; Sikhakhane, 2024; Steyn & Mafata, 2024). These reductions force NPOs to reduce services to children and their families, increasing the risk of children needing alternative care. This is discussed later in this chapter in relation to social work services to foster youth and their families.

The experiences of orphanhood, abandonment, and abuse show that foster youth usually enter care due to multiple, overlapping factors rather than a single cause. Their stories reveal the emotional impact of losing parents, being abandoned, or experiencing maltreatment, as well as the resilience of extended families and foster parents who provide stability despite their own challenges. From a capability approach, these experiences highlight how children's opportunities for security, belonging, and choice are often limited before they enter care. Critical theory emphasizes that these situations are not just family problems but reflect wider structural inequalities, including poverty, gender inequality, the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and the lasting effects of apartheid and underfunded social services. Children's entry into foster care, therefore, reflects both personal hardships and broader systemic failures, showing the need for solutions that address deeper social injustices.

7.2.2 "I DID NOT KNOW I WAS A FOSTER CHILD"

Of the thirty participants, twenty-three knew the reasons for their foster placement, while seven remained unaware of the circumstances surrounding their placement. The high level of awareness among participants in this study aligns with findings from Mampane and Ross (2017) in South Africa, where participants understood the reasons for their placement. However, this contrasts with Roux *et al.* (2010), who found that the majority of participants were unaware of the circumstances leading to their foster care placement.

Four school leavers reported that they were unaware of the reasons for their placement in foster care. Additionally, case files revealed that in some instances, foster parents either provided mis-information or withheld information about biological parents. This lack of understanding reveals a gap in communication and consultation among foster parents, social workers, and the youth themselves. When foster youth are not informed about the circumstances of their placement, they may experience confusion, feelings of abandonment, and a sense of rejection.

Themba, a post-secondary student, revealed that he learned he was an orphan and had been placed in foster care just before starting high school, a fact disclosed to him by his social worker and foster parent. He shared, "*so that day they explained we always call you here is because this is a kind of like social worker's place, you an orphan. I realised that I am an orphan because I don't look like the people I live with. So I thought of it I may be an orphan, so that day like they confirmed that*". Case records indicated that Themba received counselling before and after being informed of his placement in foster care. Themba shared that he was fully integrated into the family that he was placed with. However, his foster parent, Ms Nxumalo said that he had a lot of questions about his past and where he had come from.

I was unable to find specific information regarding the disclosure of foster care status to foster children. However, a research by Baden *et al.* (2019) on disclosure to adopted children emphasizes the importance of starting disclosure as early as possible. Their findings indicate that disclosing the adoption status between birth and two years old results in the least distress for the children. Similarly, Van Delft and Van Delft (2008) found that early disclosure (between 2-6 years) aids in the acceptance process for adopted children. Drawing on her research and her own experience as an adoptive mother, Sewpaul (2020) details the challenges of telling in adoption, and underscores the importance of informing children, with the use of stories from the time they are pre-verbal, within spaces of unconditional love, care and acceptance, with the framing of biological parents making the choice to give a child into adoption as an act of love. This suggests that early disclosure to foster youth, with a focus on the life challenges of their biological parents (rather than them being constructed as unfit, dysfunctional negligent and uncaring) and emphasizing that the out-of-home placement was not their fault, can also support their acceptance, sense of belonging, identity development

and their more successful integration into academic and social life, thereby expanding their real freedoms and capabilities to thrive.

7.2.3 KIN VERSUS NON-KIN: STABILITY AND DURATION OF PLACEMENTS

The Children's Act outlines provisions for the placement of children in three types of foster care; with family members, with non-family members, or within a cluster foster care scheme (RSA, 2005). Twenty-four of the participants in this study were placed with extended family members, reflecting the extended family's crucial role in caring for OVC. Despite facing challenges and a weakening of the extended family network, it remains committed to the care for vulnerable children (Foster, 2004; Freeman & Nkomo, 2006; Pretorius & Ross, 2010; Smit, 2007; Van der Westhuizen *et al.*, 2012). The analysis of the case files and the interviews with the foster youth confirm that the burden of caring for families and children rests primarily on women, as documented by several researchers (Budlender & Lund, 2011; Hall & Richter, 2018; Mokomane, 2014; Mtshali, 2015; Pretorius & Ross, 2010; Seepamore, 2018; Van der Westhuizen *et al.*, 2012).

Table 1 reflects that three post-secondary students and three school leavers were placed with unrelated foster parents. Four unrelated foster parents were recruited by social workers, screened, and equipped with skills for caring for foster children. The other two unrelated foster parents were chosen by the children's families to care for them. The data from Table 1 reflects an equal number of post-secondary students and school leavers placed in related and unrelated placements.

Table 1 also reflects that thirteen post-secondary students had a single foster placement, while ten school leavers had a single placement. Overall, the findings in the study show that twenty-three youth experienced a single placement, suggesting a level of stability for them. This aligns with the findings of Pretorius and Ross (2010), where most study participants remained in the same foster home. According to the case records, the reasons for placement changes for the school leavers were diverse, including family conflict, behavioural challenges, substance abuse, death of a foster parent or poor treatment by foster parents. Of these, family conflicts and behaviour challenges, the latter often accompanied by substance use, were more frequently cited

reasons for placement changes. These results align with findings from previous studies, such as those by Mashiloane (2016) and Mnisi and Botha (2016) in South Africa, as well as Koh *et al.* (2014) and Vinnerljung *et al.* (2017) internationally that identified behavioural challenges and family conflict as common reasons for placement breakdowns, which could influence youths' educational outcomes.

Despite the small sample size, an unexpected finding of this study was that five school leavers who experienced multiple placements were placed in related foster care, suggesting a concern with related foster care placements. While placing children with relatives is often considered beneficial due to the familiarity and existing emotional bonds, and it is advocated by international charters and South African legislation, it appears that these placements may also face unique challenges. There may be different reasons for this. Firstly, the multiple placements and school dropouts could indicate that relatives, who are already poor and over-burdened, might struggle with the demands and responsibilities of foster care. Social workers in a study by Masha and Botha (2021) reported that sometimes foster parents felt obligated to care for children due to family connections, particularly when the children's parents have passed away, rather than a genuine desire to foster. Consequently, kinship foster parents may feel pressured into caregiving, unlike unrelated foster parents who actively choose to foster. Another contributing factor may be the lack of thorough screening and training for kin caregivers, due to the high demand for foster care services (Mashiloane, 2016; Pretorius & Ross, 2010). There may be an assumption that related caregivers possess an inherent ability to care for family members. However, without adequate training, they may be unprepared to manage challenging behaviours and handle conflicts effectively. This raises important questions about the adequacy of support systems for related foster parents and suggests the need for targeted intervention, including emotional support for caregivers, to ensure stability and continuity in the foster youth's lives. These findings, however, are in contrast to international studies by Font (2015), Koh *et al.* (2014) and Lovett and Xue (2020) that suggest that kinship care placements provide more stability and improved outcomes for youth in care.

The findings on kin and non-kin foster care placements show both strengths and challenges. Stable placements support children's sense of belonging, education, and

emotional security, while multiple moves limit these opportunities. Kin caregivers often face financial and emotional strain, reflecting broader structural issues like gender inequality and underfunded child protection services. Foster care stability, therefore, depends not only on households but also on wider social, political, and economic factors.

7.2.4 FOSTER YOUTHS' INCREASED RESPONSIBILITIES IN THE FOSTER HOME

The majority of participants in the study, both males and females revealed that they undertook routine household tasks such as cleaning and washing dishes. Three participants expressed frustration, stating that they bore the burden of these chores alone while their foster families, especially foster siblings their own age, contributed little, as evident in Angel's (post-secondary student) response,

She was yelling at me and her daughter didn't do anything at the house, everything was done by me. It was so stressful, I did not want to come back to the house ... Because when I came back from school I had to take care of another baby that she fostered.

Certain youth faced additional duties due to being older siblings, particularly if they were female. Ntombi, a post- secondary student related,

I am the only girl at home. Usually I clean the house in the morning before I go to school. Then go to school come back, wash the dishes and cook.

Mavis, also a post-secondary student shared,

I had to cook because I was the oldest in my family. My other sister was living in Pinetown. So, I have to make sure everything is right.

The participants expressed that they often burned the midnight oil to study and complete their homework, as this was the only time available.

These findings reflect the heightened responsibilities that some youth in foster care, particularly females, must shoulder, often requiring them to take on adult roles while still being children. This would have prevented them from being "normal teenagers" (Farmer & Kiraly, 2020). This is consistent with studies by Clemens *et al.* (2017), Louw

and Joubert (2007) and Perumal (2011), where participants similarly reported increased responsibilities in the foster home, caring for siblings and other children. This additional burden affects the time available for studying and homework. Informed by the capability approach, this shows how unequal responsibilities at home can restrict children's freedom and choices. Yet, none of the youth spoke to their social workers about this, which is sadly not unanticipated given the social workers' preoccupation with fulfilling their administrative and statutory tasks.

There were contradictions between the youth and the foster parents' reports on responsibilities in the home. The youth mentioned being responsible for tasks like cleaning, cooking, and taking care of other children. There was a noticeable trend where female youth, especially older siblings, felt more burdened with household duties and caregiving, which are consistent with traditional gender roles in many cultures (Budlender & Lund, 2011; Hall & Richter, 2018; Mokomane, 2014; Mtshali, 2015). Critical theory draws attention to how systemic inequalities and traditional gender roles force young women to carry heavy caregiving responsibilities. Foster parents, on the other hand, asserted that they handled most household tasks themselves and prioritized the youths' education. The foster parents may have had a vested interest in portraying themselves in a more favourable light. However, the accounts of the foster youth are aligned to findings from other studies (Clemens *et al.*, 2017; Louw & Joubert, 2007; Perumal, 2011) suggesting that this maybe more accurate in reflecting their experiences of their household responsibilities.

7.2.5 CONNECTING WITH SIBLINGS AND BIOLOGICAL FAMILIES

Relationships are important for foster youth, encompassing connections with their siblings, biological families, foster parents and foster families. The following is a discussion of the relationships foster youth experienced with their siblings and biological parents during their placements.

While the majority of participants had siblings, only twelve entered foster care with them, unlike a study by Pretorius and Ross (2010), where most participants were placed with their siblings. Most participants reported having close relationships with their siblings, irrespective of whether they were in foster care together. Siblings often provided emotional support and assistance with schoolwork, with some older siblings

also offering financial help. Anele, a post-secondary student, reported that *“it is a good relationship, I’m like their younger sibling”*. *“My older sister pays for my tuition fees”* said Mavis, a post-secondary student.

Wanda and Amy, two school leavers were placed in foster care with their siblings after their initial placements broke down. These siblings were themselves in foster care previously and embraced the responsibilities as caregivers when there were no other placement options for the youth. Both Amy and Wanda mentioned that their siblings were encouraging and supportive of their academic needs. Amy shared, *“my sister kept on running back to school to get me back, running back, the school told her no, I must go to FET”*. From a capability perspective, strong sibling bonds supported key functionings such as belonging, emotional security, and educational continuity. Studies by Dhludhlu (2021) and Moodley (2020) similarly reveal the supportive bonds between youth in alternative care and their siblings. Neagu and Sebba (2019) and Pecora *et al.* (2010) also emphasize that, for children in alternative care, relationships with biological siblings often hold greater importance than those with parents.

Many of the participants in this study conveyed deep sadness over the loss of their parents, believing their lives would have been very different if their parents were still alive. When children are placed in alternative care as a result of neglect, abuse, or abandonment, services are intended to be offered to facilitate reunification with their biological families. This study found the prevalent lack of strong relationships that many youth had with their biological families. Based on the case records, seven of the school leavers had connections with their biological families. Here are some findings regarding the difficult relationship between some of the school leavers and their biological families,

- ✓ The biological fathers of Minenhle, Senzo and John, whose whereabouts were reported by the maternal family to be unknown at the point of the inquiry, were subsequently located. The maternal families had reached out to these fathers for help with the youth as they were presenting with behavioural problems. However, this support did not materialise.
- ✓ Mark’s parents, who had neglected him and abused alcohol, maintained contact, but this was disruptive. Mark became troublesome in the foster home,

following his visit to his parents and extended families, and required counselling.

- ✓ John's father visited while intoxicated and removed him from the foster home. This distressed him, and he received counselling to cope with this.

The school leavers themselves shared that they experience distress following contact with their biological parents. Mark shared,

School was nice until grade nine. Got into contact with my biological mother and then from there life decided to tip over... It was affecting me because I wanted to see my mother but then there was always problems.

Two youth who entered tertiary education maintained contact with their biological families. Hellen, whose parents had abandoned her, occasionally communicated with her, but she was unable to recall the exact date of their last interaction. Mason mentioned having occasional contact with his father but explained that his father was unable to provide care due to disability and alcohol abuse. While legislation and policies advocate maintaining contact between children and their biological families, it is crucial to recognise the potential negative impact of such contact on the child, which sometimes impacts their education.

Additionally, the case records do not indicate that structured reunification services were provided to biological parents. This is echoed by a social worker, Amahle, who shared, *"with us we don't focus on the biological mother to make sure she comes to the office and she communicates with the child. Then when the child starts misbehaving or needs the mother you can't get hold of the biological mother, but we had a chance to keep this mother"*. Amahle was pointing out that when her biological mother was present, she did not receive any services. This aligns with studies by Boning and Ferreira (2013) and Dhludhu (2021), which found that social workers often fell short in providing adequate reunification services to biological parents. From a critical theory perspective, the lack of reunification services not only constrained children's ability to rebuild supportive ties but also highlighted systemic neglect and the failure of under-resourced service providers to meet children's needs.

7.2.6 BELONGING AND IDENTITY

The relationships that youth have play a vital role in their identity development, a significant task during adolescence (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2015). This development occurs over time and is influenced by the quality of relationships adolescents have experienced throughout their lives (Smith, 2011). These relationships are crucial in supporting adolescents as they navigate this challenging period, with McGoldrick *et al.* (2016) emphasizing that families must reorganize themselves to help youth achieve autonomy and independence.

The struggle with belonging for the foster youth did not emerge as an issue with the foster parents. However, the findings suggest that strained relationships with both biological and foster families may have impacted the youths' sense of belonging in their foster homes. This was observed in both related and unrelated placements, among those who transitioned to post-secondary education and those who dropped out of school. The foster youths' experiences revealed that some struggled to fit into their foster homes and felt they were treated differently. Amy, a school leaver shared, *"when we come home from school, we clean, we do everything for them, their shoes, yet we were the same age"*. Similarly, Angel, a post-secondary student related, *"sometimes she wouldn't talk having moods, it was bad, I did not want to come back to the house, her daughter didn't do anything at the house, everything was done by me"*. From a capability approach perspective, these experiences limited their ability to develop a sense of belonging, emotional security, and personal identity, while supportive family relationships could have helped expand these opportunities.

The findings from the interviews and focus groups with the social workers also revealed that foster youth struggled with belonging in the foster home. This is what Joanne had to say, *"they lack a sense of belonging. Most of the foster parents call the children like you are a social workers' child. Related or non-related you are a social worker's child. There is no point where a child feels like I belong in this home"*. Allan and Kholeka suggested that foster parents treat foster children differently from their own children. Amahle pointed out that cultural differences further contribute to this lack of belonging, particularly concerning the performance of rituals. She said, *"if the child was performing those rituals in her house, then we place the child, and where she staying, they don't do anything that is related to it. Spiritually it does affect the child. I*

remember one of my children was saying she wanted the foster parent to slaughter a goat for her, while the foster parent does not do that. The child was crying saying they must do it. The foster parent refused because they don't believe in those things". Children feel disconnected from their foster families when the rituals practiced by their biological families are not conducted. This disconnection can deepen feelings of loss and make it harder for children to develop a sense of belonging in foster care.

7.2.7 ADOLESCENCE BEHAVIOURAL PROBLEMS

Adolescence is a challenging period for young people as they undergo physical and sexual maturation while developing a range of cognitive skills. During this stage, adolescents develop the ability to make decisions, solve problems, and reason (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2015). For foster youth navigating adolescence, it is crucial to consider their past losses, disruptions, and early experiences (Smith, 2011).

The case records revealed that nine of the foster youth who had dropped out of school presented with severe behavioural problems. This included staying out late at night, absconding from the foster home, not complying with the home's rules, sleeping out without informing the foster parent, and being disrespectful and defiant.

Some of the youth who were school leavers admitted that they did engage in risky behaviour, with John sharing,

It was just me getting naughty and started disobeying rules

The foster parents of school leavers also related that the foster youth presented with behavioural challenges, especially when they reached adolescence. Mrs John, Mark's foster parent shared,

When Mark got to high school, then I started having problems, because then he, I think he got involved, mixed up and started doing mischief, getting up to mischief.

The case records revealed that four post-secondary students presented with behaviour problems. Three foster parents caring for post-secondary students shared that they encountered challenges when their foster youth entered their teenage years. They addressed these challenges by communicating with the foster youth about responsible behaviour. These findings are similar to those of Mlamla (2008) and Van

der Westhuizen *et al.* (2012), where foster parents experienced challenges with foster youth when they reached adolescence. Zastrow and Kirst-Ashman (2015) assert that parents are important in helping adolescents become more responsible and independent. Smith (2011) further points out that adolescence can be even more stressful for foster youth, who may face increased anxiety and potentially receive less support.

The behavioural challenges exhibited by the nine youth mentioned above who had dropped out of school extended into the school environment. They frequently absconded from the school grounds, engaged in truancy, stayed away for extended periods, were rude to educators and disruptive in class. Consequently, some were suspended or expelled due to their problematic behaviour and use of substances.

According to Ayanda, a school leaver, entry to high school was confusing. She said,

High school, starting to be a teenager, learning new things. High school was confusing. Teenagers that I was close to, learning new things like maybe when I come back at home I had to meet my friends. After doing my chores and having time. Like walking to stores, started drinking.

Entering high school coincides with adolescence, marking a challenging period for youth transitioning into this new phase (Berk, 2018) as experienced by Ayanda and Mandisa, a post-secondary learner. The foster parents who encountered challenges with their foster youth when they reached adolescence contacted their social workers for assistance. Social workers also noted that foster youth started presenting with behavioural challenges when they reached adolescence. Kholeka indicated, “*so the moment they reach that stage of becoming teenagers so they start to be rebellious at school and at home*”. However, social workers observed that foster parents typically did not report challenges early on, seeking help only when the behaviour became unmanageable. This delay may be attributed to the foster parents' fear that reporting issues might jeopardize the foster placements and the FCG and lead to negative perceptions from social workers. From a critical theory lens, this illustrates how economic dependency and monitoring shape reporting behaviours and conceal early warning signs, limiting social work services and support.

Adolescence is often marked by early sexual activities, which can lead to teenage pregnancies (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2015), with teenage pregnancy being a huge issue in South Africa (Dhludhlu, 2021; Mokoena, 2019). In this study, one foster youth left school due to pregnancy but remained in the foster home. Two foster youth fell pregnant after dropping out of school. Teenage pregnancy among foster youth who had dropped out of school was also noted in studies by Dhludhlu (2021) and Mokoena (2019). However, Mavis and Angel in this study had babies, but managed to return to school and progressed to tertiary education. The capability approach views this as an expansion of their agency, where supportive foster care environments enabled them to pursue education despite setbacks.

Zastrow and Kirst-Ashman (2015) assert that adolescence is a time when youth start experimenting with substances. Ten of the foster youth who had left school were involved in abusing substances and alcohol. Mark's drug use began when he absconded from his foster home to live with his grandmother. He shared "*I left and went to Durban, I stayed with my granny and got caught up in drugs*". Bandile's experiences with drugs resulted in him stealing from the foster home. He said,

Everything was good until I started smoking. Ja and then I started stealing something, stealing money. Doing bad things only when I started smoking. By the time I realised that it was too late, but they gave me a chance to come back home ... it was going to November then I started eating pills. Pills for mad people and smoking weed. Then I think it affected my brain, that's when I started doing bad things.

The foster parents also noticed that the youth were abusing substances. Mrs Sibiya, Bandile's foster parent shared,

I was just suspecting he was taking dagga.

Social workers related that some foster youth used substances while they were at school and became involved with the wrong people. These youth received counselling on the consequences of substance abuse. Some were referred to the South African National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence (SANCA) for additional support, but these interventions were largely unsuccessful as the foster youth

continued to abuse substances. In their interviews, several youth admitted to continued use of drugs, although they specified that it was limited to dagga.

Only two foster youth who had transitioned to tertiary education reported having abused substances. One was referred to SANCA and benefited from the programme, successfully overcoming his substance abuse. The other reported that he stopped using substances on his own.

Viewed through a critical theory lens, the behavioural problems experienced during adolescence cannot be reduced to individual failings. The reluctance of foster parents to report challenges, the punitive responses from schools, and the limited effectiveness of substance abuse interventions reveal how existing systems often reproduce marginalisation rather than addressing root causes. These challenges faced by foster youth can restrict key opportunities like autonomy and belonging. Yet the resilience of youth who returned to school or overcame substance use shows that enabling environments and supportive interventions can expand capabilities and foster positive development, suggesting that addressing these challenges requires interventions that challenge both systemic barriers and creating enabling conditions for youth to exercise agency, build resilience and pursue meaningful life paths.

7.2.8 PHYSICAL WELL-BEING

Case records revealed that some foster youth (both tertiary students and school leavers) faced health issues. These ranged from asthma and headaches to more severe conditions like strokes, cancer and testing HIV positive. Ntombi, a post-secondary student related that she was recently diagnosed with cancer. Asanda, a school leaver shared that she had suffered a stroke. The case records indicated that foster parents reported these health problems to the social worker during their meetings.

Three foster youth who had left school were taking prescription medication for attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). John shared, *“I am actually ADHD, so concentrating was the main thing, so I took treatment for that”*. Mark also took Ritalin but struggled with the side effects and eventually stopped taking the medication. Mark’s foster parent noted that once he entered high school, he refused to take Ritalin

despite his teachers' offers to administer it. She attributed his poor performance to not taking his medication.

7.2.9 TRAUMA

My observations during the interviews indicated that some of the youth struggled with earlier trauma. Some school leavers became very emotional when discussing their lives before their placements. For instance, Mark, who was removed due to neglect, cried as he recounted his confusion about his situation. Summer expressed distress, feeling that her mother blamed her for her placement in foster care and refused to speak to her. Summer was only four years old at the time and would have struggled to understand what was happening. Andiswa shared her confusion about being placed with an unrelated person after being removed from her mother's care due to her mother's alcohol abuse and neglect. The case records reflected that Amy, a school leaver, was allegedly sexually assaulted whilst in their mother's care. The biological mother was subsequently murdered by her partner. Amy frequently called out for her mother and began soiling herself during primary school. She was referred to a psychologist, but the foster parent appeared hesitant to ensure her attendance at the appointments, even though the costs were covered by the CPO. According to Bradshaw (1990), for children in care, the inner child is often wounded and burdened by the toxic shame inflicted through childhood trauma and abuse. This might manifest in difficulties in expressing their emotions, poor self-esteem and managing relationships in adulthood.

Ms Nxumalo had this to share about Themba, a post-secondary foster youth in her care,

He just cries a lot. Recently he just told me the reason why he cries most of the time is that his parents are not around to see him that he is doing well in life.

Studies by Mitchell (2018) and Trivedi (2019) found that children in care struggled with trauma, grief, and confusion. Participants in a study by Clemens *et al.* (2017) shared that their previous trauma often led to them being misunderstood, isolated, and marginalized, which negatively affected their capacity to cope with the challenges of school.

The social workers in the study expressed the view that past trauma affected the educational experiences of foster youth. Enhle provided these insights into why foster youth often struggle academically,

Sometimes I feel maybe foster care children are dealing with too much backgrounds. There's lots of things that have happened because with most of our cases ... we talking about children that have been through a lot, that have experienced bad things ... some are finding it hard to accept some other things that have happened, even having no parents ... Some ... have so much anger, it's a lot.

Although the social workers recognised the impact of childhood trauma, an important finding from the case records is that many children did not receive therapeutic intervention to assist them cope with the death of their parents, abandonment, abuse, or neglect prior to or following their foster care placements. The absence of therapeutic intervention is particularly concerning, as it contradicts the global definition of social work, which emphasizes the importance of engaging people to deal with life challenges and strengthening their emotional well-being. The social workers' primary focus was on assisting the foster parents to access the relevant documentation to place the child in foster care so that the foster parent could access the FCG. This lack of intervention may be attributed to the increased caseloads that social workers have and the focus on the extensive mandatory legislated processes (Lesea, 2017; Ngwenya, 2011; Perumal, 2011). Participants in the study by Dlamini and Sewpaul (2015) lamented that bureaucratic requirements prevented them from providing direct social work services. This comment from a social worker reveals the administrative role of the social worker,

We need to make sure that the client receives the grant ... we need to make sure that this child does get the birth certificate from the Department of Home Affairs. Also, if the child is not schooling, you need to make sure that this child at this age needs to attend school.

Joanne, another social worker related,

Most of the time when we place children we only focus on their safety. We mostly focus on paperwork instead of their emotional wellbeing. And the other

thing we forget about their pain of loss. Specifically, that these children have lost parents.

A comment from Aphiwe reveals that the workloads of social workers prevent them from focusing on the child *“the other things that prevents us is our workload. When you finish with a case, there is like three more waiting you need to remove this one. Then you end up okay I am done with this one I will see it later. Then the more cases coming you end up forgetting about the other one”*. Social workers acknowledged that their heavy caseloads prevented them from focusing on therapeutic services, yet they all agreed that providing such support is crucial for helping foster youth cope with their life experiences. Social workers in this study reported managing over 60 cases each, exceeding the caseload limits recommended by DSD. It is disconcerting the social workers and the foster parents were not able to see the possible connection between the youths’ adverse life experiences and what was framed as behavioural problems.

Viewed through a critical theory lens, the lack of therapeutic support shows how systemic pressures such as high caseloads, bureaucracy, and focus on outputs, overshadow children’s emotional needs. Trauma-related behaviours are often labelled as “problems,” silencing foster youth and reinforcing inequality. The capability approach suggests that this lack of support limits young people’s opportunities to develop emotional well-being, autonomy, and supportive relationships, restricting their ability to thrive.

7.2.10 ABUSE IN THE FOSTER HOME

Fourteen foster youth reported experiencing both emotional and physical abuse in their foster homes. Four school leavers and two post-secondary students shared that they received physical punishment when they did something wrong. Angel and Thobeka, both post-secondary students and six school leavers (Summer, Akhona, Mark, Wanda, Senzo, and Amy) reported instances of emotional abuse, sometimes from the foster parents and sometimes from the foster family. For example Angel shared, *“she was yelling at me, but she never beat me”*, and Wanda related, *“my grandmother who was the foster parent was quite okay it is just the other people in the house that were treating me badly, mistreating me”*.

The responses from the youth participants in the study align with findings from several South African studies conducted by Dhludhlu (2021), Mampane and Ross (2017),

Mnisi and Botha (2016), Siyawareva (2019) and Van der Westhuizen *et al.* (2012) where participants reported experiences of abuse and neglect in foster homes. International studies by Kantor *et al.* (2022), Landers *et al.* (2021), Morton (2015b) and Pecora *et al.* (2010) documented similar findings, indicating that children in foster care globally face risks of abuse and neglect.

None of the case records documented instances of abuse in the foster homes, suggesting that none of the youth had disclosed this to their social workers. During the interviews, foster parents did not report any instances of abuse within the foster home, a finding consistent with Mnisi and Botha (2016). Instead, they emphasized that they addressed concerns with their foster youth through open conversations and communication. However, the social workers in the focus groups reported that foster youth sometimes experience abuse in their foster homes. Joanne's response was "*most of the children are getting abused and are used for whatever chores at home ... then that really affects them because they don't have anyone to tell*". Likewise, social workers in a South African study by Masha and Botha (2021) reported that foster children are often exposed to abuse and neglect.

The discrepancy between the case records, the social workers' observations, and the foster care youths' disclosure of abuse during the interviews, demonstrate the reluctance or inability of foster youth to disclose their experiences of abuse and highlights an important gap between youths' lived experiences, official documentation, and foster parents' self-reports. This reluctance may stem from fear, a lack of trust, or a belief that reporting the abuse will not lead to meaningful change. It might also be related to the social workers' focus on instrumental and administrative tasks, rather than on developing therapeutic relationships, which further reproduces conditions in which abuse is hidden and children remain vulnerable. Thus, bureaucratic priorities overshadow children's lived realities. These experiences of abuse are seen as direct constraints on essential capabilities such as bodily integrity, emotional well-being, and the ability to form trusting relationships which will undermine the youths' freedom to develop independence and build a sense of belonging that are important for participating fully in life.

7.2.11 STIGMA, SHAME AND DISCRIMINATION

Youth in care often experience stigma and discrimination, just by being in foster care (Fieller & Loughlin, 2022; Dansey *et al.*, 2019). Some of the youth withheld their foster care status because they did not want to be seen differently. Akhona, a school leaver related,

We never talked about it. I don't like talking about it. All my friends have mums and dads. And I do wish I had my mum and my dad. I don't have them. So, I don't take it like something that I want to talk about being a foster child.

This reflects the inner child's pain and desire for normalcy and belonging (Bradshaw, 1988; 1990). The social workers also related that foster youth were hesitant to share with their friends that they were in foster care. Likewise, studies by Johnson *et al.* (2020) and Moodley (2020) revealed that youth in out-of-home placements did not want to disclose their status on account of shame, stigma and discrimination. Bradshaw (1988; 1990) provides insights into toxic shame that explain why these youth are particularly sensitive to being seen as different, as their wounded inner child is aware of and affected by how society may view them.

The youth shared various experiences related to their foster care status. Mavis, a post-secondary student, related, *"we are attending Lifeline where we are talking about our parents, guardians because I don't have parents, so we normally just enjoying food, talking about HIV and AIDS, and abuse"*. Themba, also a post-secondary student spoke about how discovering he was an "orphan" profoundly impacted his life, motivating him to prove himself to the world. Themba shared, *"my experience like realising myself started in high school after I was told that actually I am an orphan, that's where my life started"*. Themba's need to prove himself may stem from deep-seated feelings of inadequacy and shame rooted in his early childhood experiences (Bradshaw, 1988). Pamela, who progressed to tertiary education expressed her desire not to be treated differently because she was a foster child.

Summer, a school leaver mentioned forming a friendship with another child whom she felt was just like her. Summer felt that she was understood by her friend, as they both shared similar struggles. Ayanda, another school leaver said,

To be a foster child is hard. Seeing my grandmother, trying to raise us the way she wanted So, seeing our grandmother suffer for us. It was hard. It is hard.

Ayanda's reflections on hardship and the observed suffering of a caregiver can contribute to a child's internalized shame, as they might feel responsible for the difficulties faced by their guardians (Bradshaw, 1988). The concept of the inner child helps us to understand how foster youths' experiences of abandonment, stigma and their struggle for acceptance can compromise their emotional well-being and their overall chances of a well-balanced and successful life, and these might be predisposing factors to the behavioural and substance use problems discussed above.

Feelings of shame and embarrassment on account of being foster children were accentuated by experiences of poverty. Some, described being "mocked" at school (Siya, a post-secondary student); "not fitting in with friends" (Akhona, a school leaver); and being "treated differently" and feeling "out of place" (Summer, school leaver), deepen their feelings of inner shame and alienation (Bradshaw, 1988).

Some foster parents also experienced stigma in the community. Ms Mchunu shared that her foster child was mocked by a neighbour for not having a mother, which led to an altercation where the child assaulted the neighbour. This response from the child most likely stemmed from his feelings of shame and inadequacy (Bradshaw, 1988). Similarly, Mrs. Kunene reported, *"there was stigma from the community for me as a foster parent because they say I was a fool for taking in four children when I had six children of my own and there were times when I struggled, and they would laugh and the children would hear that and it would make them feel bad and that they felt like they were a burden to me"*.

Social workers similarly shared that foster youth faced stigma. Mandy shared, *"kids are mean. They want to find out why your mummy doesn't like you, you don't have a mummy, that's not your real mummy. That stigma of being a foster child and receiving a grant, it's there"*. Social workers said that foster youth encountered stigma at school, and were divided on conducting school visits. While these visits were necessary to confirm that the needs of the foster youth were addressed, they also caused embarrassment for the youth when they are singled out and called to see the social worker. Fikile shared this about a school visit,

The child will feel that the other children will look at her differently, because now the social worker is visiting the home, the school and usually they have that perception that if the social worker is involved, maybe the family is not financially stable, or there is abuse, things like that. So, some of the children are not happy if the social worker conducts visits to the school.

Mampane and Ross (2017) and Perumal (2011) also found that foster youth feel stigmatised by their families, schools, and communities. It is therefore important that all role players involved with foster youth acknowledge and nurture the inner child, address the causes of shame, and create environments where young people feel valued and understood, as this can promote healing and strengthen resilience in the long term (Bradshaw, 1990). Viewed through a critical theory lens, the stigma, shame, and discrimination faced by foster youth reveal not only deep personal pain but also wider social problems, as schools, communities, and welfare systems often reinforce feelings of difference and exclusion, leaving them silenced and marginalised. From a capability approach, stigma further restricts important freedoms such as belonging, dignity, and full participation in society, narrowing the opportunities available to foster youth to pursue lives they have reason to value. Addressing these challenges therefore requires both supporting the inner healing of young people and transforming the systems and attitudes that limit them, so that foster youth are given real opportunities to grow, belong, and succeed.

7.3 THEME: SOCIAL WORKERS: CONTACT, ACADEMIC SUPPORT AND PERSONAL ATTRIBUTES

7.3.1 CONTACT WITH THE SOCIAL WORKER: PERSPECTIVES OF FOSTER YOUTH AND FOSTER PARENTS

Foster youth reported varying levels of contact with their social workers, ranging from once a month to once a year or even less frequently. Some of the youth participants noted that social workers primarily communicated with their foster parents, highlighting a power imbalance within the FCS. The reliance on foster parents for communication can marginalize the voices of youth as noted from these responses;

The social worker only spoke to my granny, then making sure the money was there for my granny to buy us food (Mavis, post-secondary student).

I was scared to ask my foster parent to come and see the social worker, because she was going to ask me if I have got any problem. So, I ended up not coming here to see the social worker. But I wish I had enough time because sometimes I did not want to disclose some of the information to my foster parent, I wanted to speak with the person that is the social worker (Andiswa, school leaver).

In contrast, foster parents reported more regular interactions with social workers, often without the children present, primarily for submitting school reports. An analysis of case files revealed the following patterns of contact:

- Nine post-secondary students and five school leavers had individual sessions with social workers, but these were infrequent.
- Four post-secondary students only had contact with social workers during placement reviews.
- Limited home and school visits were conducted with both post-secondary learners and school leavers.
- Only two post-secondary students participated in group work programmes. Additionally, two foster parents caring for post-secondary students and one foster parent caring for a school leaver attended group work programmes.

Both school leavers and post-secondary students experienced limited direct contact with social workers, which may have hindered their ability to receive the necessary support and guidance. The reliance on foster parents for communication distanced the youth from accessing services directly. These findings align with South African studies by Boning and Ferreira (2013), Masha and Botha (2021) and Pretorius and Ross (2010), which reported that foster youth experienced infrequent contact with their social workers.

The infrequent individual sessions and the focus on administrative interactions indicate that social workers are not addressing the emotional needs of the foster youth. Boning and Ferreira (2013) and Pretorius and Ross (2010) also found that the emotional and

psychological needs of foster children were not overlooked, as social workers focused on administrative processes. Viewed through a critical theory lens, the current practice reflects systemic inequalities and power imbalances that marginalize foster youth. The reliance on foster parents for communication and the focus on administrative tasks are linked with neoliberal and new managerialist practices prioritizing efficiency over personal interactions with foster youth. High caseloads and limited funding constrain social workers' ability to provide meaningful support. This compromises the quality of services rendered to foster families and children and impacts the well-being of social workers, contributing to frustration and burnout.

A particularly concerning finding from the interviews was that ten youth who had dropped out of school and eight who had progressed to tertiary education did not have any expectations of their social workers. For instance, Mark, a school leaver, questioned whether his social worker could offer any meaningful support as he rarely saw her. School leavers John, Akhona, and Olwethu, along with post-secondary students Mason and Angel, expressed a desire for more involvement and communication from their social workers. Senzo (a school leaver) and Mavis, Pamela, and Lusanda (post-secondary students) stated that having private discussions with their social workers, similar to the interview with me, would have helped them address their challenges. The current approach, which focuses on oversight of academic performance and home environments, fails to adequately address the emotional and personal needs of the foster youth. In South African studies by Mampane and Ross (2017), Pretorius and Ross (2010) and Van der Westhuizen *et al.* (2012), foster children similarly shared a need for a closer relationship with their social workers, where they were listened to.

The focus group discussions and the interviews with the social workers revealed variability in the rate of interaction with foster youth and their families. Some social workers reported seeing their foster youth as infrequently as every six months or annually, with some only meeting during placement reviews. In cases of crises, social workers tended to have more frequent contact. Amahle, Enhle, Mandy, and Joey suggested that, ideally, social workers should meet their service users four times a year. All social workers cited high caseloads as a major barrier to regular contact. This aligns with studies by Boning and Ferreira (2013) and Lesea (2017) where social

workers shared that caseloads impacted service delivery. Mandy and Joey said that a lack of funding within CPOs constrained their ability to maintain regular contact and implement programmes for foster youth. CPOs rely on government funding to provide social work services. However, the adoption of neoliberal policies in South Africa is pushing CPOs to become less dependent on government support, a shift with which they are struggling. Reduced funding combined with new managerial practices is adversely affecting social workers' ability to engage with people meaningfully (Sewpaul, 2013a; Spolander *et al.*, 2016). Busani emphasized that the focus on paperwork reduced meaningful human contact, saying, "*we are behind the computer typing all the time, writing, repeating the same thing all the time. Each social worker can't have a caseload of one hundred and fifty. Then you start to lose it; we start to become cracked because we cannot micromanage everything*". Allan echoed Busani's concerns, "*I am with Busani. Because sometimes there is a client in front of you, telling you a serious story, but at the same time, statistics are due, audits are due. The client is talking, and the time is ticking. I have to go and attend. So, pressure*".

The findings reveal the difficulties faced by social workers in maintaining consistent contact with foster youth and their families. The emphasis on administrative tasks, such as paperwork, compiling statistics and meeting audit requirements, detracts from direct interaction with children and families. Busani and Allan's experiences illustrate the conflict between administrative demands and the need for meaningful engagement with people, contribute to frustration and burnout among social workers. This not only compromises the services provided to foster youth but also affects the well-being of the social workers. From a capability approach perspective, the lack of meaningful interaction restricts foster youths' opportunities to develop capabilities such as voice, agency, belonging, and educational achievement that could expand their opportunities and life chances.

The case files analysis revealed that the following areas were addressed during contact between the social workers, youth and the foster parents:

- Twelve school leavers and six post-secondary students were counselled on their academic performance.

- Six post-secondary students were counselled on career choices and tertiary applications. Of these, four received additional counselling to help them cope with campus life.
- Nine post-secondary students were counselled on responsible behaviour and equipped with life skills.
- Nine school leavers, who presented behavioural challenges, received similar counselling sessions.
- Six of the school leavers were counselled to return to school.
- Interviews with foster parents primarily focused on obtaining school reports, documents for foster care placement reviews, and monitoring the foster placements. Twelve foster parents received counselling on parenting skills, and coping with the behaviour and health of the foster youth.

7.3.2 ACADEMIC SUPPORT

A further aspect that emerged in the focus groups and interviews with the social workers was that they monitored the academic progress of foster youth by reviewing school reports submitted by foster parents each term. Mandy and Busani explained that after receiving these reports, they would discuss the child's academic performance with both the child and the foster parent, identifying areas needing attention. The case records revealed that seven foster youth who progressed to tertiary education and six school leavers consistently submitted their reports. However, seven foster youth who proceeded to tertiary education and eight school leavers failed to submit their reports regularly. Notably, one foster youth who advanced to tertiary education did not submit any reports, and another school leaver's foster parent failed to provide reports despite repeated requests. While those who had positive relationships with their social workers appreciated it, the data reflects that the social workers' review of school reports seems to make little or no difference in relation to foster youth leaving school or proceeding into tertiary education.

The review of the case files reveals that despite the limited contact between social workers and foster youth, various topics related to the youth's academic performance, home environment, behaviour, and future aspirations were addressed. However, the infrequency of these interactions, exacerbated by administrative burdens and high

caseloads, limits social workers' ability to provide holistic support. Despite social workers' awareness of the youths' adverse childhood experiences, there was no evidence of therapeutic intervention.

From a critical theory view, this shows how the system is driven by policies that focus on efficiency and measurable outcomes, like placement reviews, instead of the wider emotional and educational needs of foster youth. This focus often overlooks the structural barriers they face and reinforces inequality. Using the capability approach, while monitoring progress is important, it does not build resilience, confidence, or a sense of agency in learning. For example, some youth felt that private talks with social workers could have helped them deal with personal challenges that may have been affecting their studies. Supporting foster youth therefore requires more than tracking results, it means creating strong relationships and giving them a voice in shaping their educational journeys.

7.3.3 PERSONAL ATTRIBUTES OF SOCIAL WORKERS

Social workers in this study acknowledged that they are often inundated with administrative and bureaucratic tasks and carry high caseloads, which can sometimes overshadow their ability to build meaningful, trusting, and therapeutic relationships with foster youth. While these structural challenges are significant, they do not fully define the social worker's role in the lives of foster youth.

Beyond the administrative responsibilities, some social workers demonstrate deep empathy, care, and commitment to the well-being of the foster youth and their families. Although this was not explicitly reflected in case records and in this sample, insights from the focus groups, as well as my own experience in the child protection field, reveal the dedication of some social workers who go above and beyond to support foster youth. They make concerted efforts to offer emotional support and guidance to foster youth. These individuals make deliberate efforts to provide guidance and emotional support, demonstrating qualities such as compassion, patience, and persistence. Such personal attributes help to build rapport with foster youth, even amidst systemic pressures.

Critical theory highlights how systemic pressures and bureaucratic demands limit social workers' ability to focus on relationships and support. Yet, through their dedication and care, social workers can resist these constraints, creating opportunities for foster youth to build trust, belonging, and a sense of voice. This support will help youth feel valued and empowered to pursue lives they find meaningful.

7.4 CONCLUSION

This chapter highlighted the complexities and difficulties faced by foster youth, including issues of belonging, trauma, abuse, shame, stigma and discrimination and the social workers' role in child protection. The study reveals several trends regarding the placement of youth in foster care and their educational outcomes. Youth are primarily placed in foster care due to being orphaned, abandoned, abused, or neglected, with poverty playing a major role in almost all instances. Addressing these issues requires not only individual interventions but also broader structural changes to reduce poverty, inequality and unemployment, which are linked with neoliberal, capitalist ideology and practices. Central to critical theory is how race, class and gender intersect to impact access to power, status and resources. Despite the transition to democracy, it is still Black African children in South Africa who are subject to dire poverty and denial of life opportunities. Thus, critical theorists emphasize the need for systemic social changes to address the root causes of poverty that contributes to children entering alternative care.

Most youth are placed in related foster care, underscoring the role of extended families, especially poor Black women, in caregiving. However, multiple placements within these families suggest specific challenges that need to be addressed to ensure the stability and emotional well-being of the youth, which is essential for their academic performance. Increased responsibilities in foster homes, particularly for female youth, deprive them of time to focus on education, limiting their capabilities and potential. The power imbalance between foster parents and youth, where the foster youth's voices are often unheard, needs to be addressed to ensure that youth can voice their concerns. There is also a lack of trust in the CPS that often leaves foster youth silent about their traumatic life experiences and about abuse in the foster home.

There are clear gaps between the foster youths' and foster parents' needs and the services they receive from social workers. A narrow focus on academic performance and home conditions, which are mandatory, statutory requirements, overlooks the need for relationship building, trust, availability and continuity. Social workers need to redefine their roles to provide holistic services to foster families and foster children, and they need to engage in deeper therapeutic intervention with the youth, ensuring that the experiences and needs of the youth shape the services provided. As neoliberal downsizing, cuts in welfare spending and new managerialism impact the quality, quantity and range of services offered, social workers need to, as a collective, become aware of these impacts on practice and engage in advocacy initiatives to counter these influences on the profession, and to improve services.

It is crucial to recognise and support social workers who successfully navigate the challenges of their role while going above and beyond to support foster youth. Their dedication demonstrates that while bureaucratic demands are unavoidable, they do not have to overshadow the core ethics and values of the social work profession.

CHAPTER EIGHT: FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO OR IMPEDE THE EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES OF FOSTER YOUTH

8.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides insights into the opportunities and challenges that foster youth encounter in achieving positive educational outcomes. These include personal factors such as resilience, motivation and aspirations, the role of foster parents, the education system and peer support. By examining these factors, the chapter provides a comprehensive understanding of the educational experiences of foster youth and the ways in which their unique circumstances influenced their academic achievements.

8.2 RESILIENCE, MOTIVATION AND ASPIRATIONS

This study reveals the overwhelming challenges faced by foster youth, including loss, abandonment, abuse, and neglect, with some enduring further maltreatment while in care. Despite these adversities, many of the foster youth demonstrated remarkable resilience, evident among both school leavers and post-secondary students.

Thirteen foster youth who progressed to tertiary education displayed resilience in achieving positive educational outcomes. Ntombi, who was diagnosed with cancer said,

I want to be a chartered accountant. So, I told myself that I don't want to quit school, I want to achieve this dream. Even though some other challenges will still come. And I think that my mother is going to be proud of me wherever she is.

Despite her ill-health, Ntombi wanted to progress at school to make her late mother proud, highlighting her determination. Pamela's grandmother who was also her foster mother, passed away a few days before the start of her matriculation exams. Pamela persevered and obtained excellent marks in her final examinations, allowing her to register at a university. Pamela shared,

To be honest I just wanted better for myself. I've always wanted to make my grandmother proud. As much as she would say that she won't see me go to varsity, she always said that she's willing to die at least when I finish my matric

... she died when I was a week away from starting my final exams. It was very, very hard. I had to just mourn for a few days then get my life back together cos I had to face my final matric.

Pamela was determined to go to university to honour her grandmother and tried to move past her grief in order to do that. Themba, who was an orphan, was determined to show his biological extended family that despite them rejecting him, he was able to go to university and achieve well. He said,

First of all it is the fact that I am an orphan, so I really need to work hard so I can ... can start my own family and grow my own legacy. Then secondly, I have that thing in my head like I need to show these parents who like didn't see an opportunity to raise me.

Angel, who progressed to university, faced many challenges during her secondary school years. She had two children, and though she initially abandoned her second baby, she later acknowledged being the mother. Having lost both parents, Angel herself was in need of care and protection. Placed in an unrelated foster home, she overcame these hardships, matriculated with a Bachelor's pass, and enrolled in university. Angel expressed a deep wish to give her children a better life than the one she had experienced. Mavis, who had had a baby in secondary school was also concerned about providing a better life for her baby and progressed to tertiary education, had the following to share,

I passed grade eleven and then I passed grade twelve but it was so difficult at the point where my marks dropped. I passed all the tests but not that much ... Lot of things happening at the time, I was having a baby. It was hard ... I managed to have self-introspection. Moving forward what I need to improve and I did that.

Angel and Mavis's experiences reflect the findings of Mavundla's (2019) study in South Africa, where youth participants who had had babies expressed a similar desire to return to school to improve their lives and those of their children.

Five school leavers also displayed resilience, despite being faced with adversities. Pearl, a school leaver in this study, dropped out in grade 10 due to cultural obligations but returned to school and completed grade 11. Unfortunately, her education was

again disrupted, preventing her from completing grade 12. Despite these setbacks, she aspired to return and complete grade 12, emphasizing that she had never truly failed in school. She explained, *“so repeating grade eleven when I have never failed before. Like I didn’t fail last year, I just dropped out, but I know that I would not have failed”*.

Senzo, Kwanele, and Wanda, also school leavers, had part-time jobs. While they did not plan to return to school to complete their matriculation as they had struggled academically, they were focused on earning money to save and acquire technical skills, which was their strength. These foster youth chose alternatives that were more rewarding and fulfilling to them, rather than attending school (Maarman & Lamont-Mbawuli, 2017). Asanda, another school leaver, suffered a stroke at a young age but continued her education. Although she did not pass grade 12, she shared, *“this year I took a gap year. I just thought that I need to take a gap year, I will go back to school, matric finishing school”*.

The experiences shared by the youth above reveal that, despite their trauma and adversities, they exhibited resilience and the ability to overcome significant obstacles and strive towards educational and personal goals. This resonates with the capability approach, which emphasises the importance of expanding the real freedoms and opportunities that empower individuals to pursue the lives they find meaningful (Sen, 1993). Similarly, studies by Dhludlu (2021), Lesea (2017) and Moodley (2020) with youth in alternative care demonstrated resilience and the ability to overcome the obstacles they faced, with a strong focus on improving their futures.

A further finding in the study was the lack of motivation and low aspirations among school leavers. Seven school leavers expressed that they did not enjoy their high school experiences. Eight school leavers revealed that they were reluctant to return to high school because they felt embarrassed by their classmates advancing while they had to stay behind. This sense of shame and inadequacy contributed to their unwillingness to continue with their education. Wanda shared, *“my best wasn’t enough. Even if I was given an opportunity to go back to school I don’t think I will make it because it is not in me”*. Although six school leavers had intentions to pursue further education and develop specific skills, none of them had taken steps towards these plans. This suggests a lack of initiative or perhaps barriers that prevent them from

progressing toward their educational and skill development objectives which in turn restrict their capabilities and, consequently, their freedom to pursue education and personal development (Sen, 1993).

Similarly, studies by Johnson *et al.* (2020) and Moyer and Goldberg (2020) revealed a lack of motivation among foster youth. These studies reveal that foster youth often perceive the adults in their lives as having low expectations of them and fail to provide adequate encouragement for academic achievement. Foster youth in a study by Clemens *et al.* (2017), related that the negative messages that they received from the adults affected their self esteem and educational aspirations. The observed lack of motivation and low aspirations among some school leavers indicate systemic barriers that restrict their capabilities. This emphasizes the importance of identifying and removing obstacles that hinder individuals from reaching their potential (Sen, 1993).

Conversely, all of the youth who had progressed to tertiary education showed high levels of motivation and aspirations. This positivity was closely linked to their desire to improve their circumstances and achieve independence. The youth expressed a strong commitment to providing for themselves and their foster parents, securing stable employment, owning their homes and cars, and ultimately becoming independent. The vision for their futures began in secondary school. Some of the youth had challenges at school, but were determined to achieve their goals as evidenced by some of the responses below,

I was a hard worker that's why, I was not that clever kid. I work hard (Mavis, post-secondary student)

I failed my grade eleven, I coped with it by associating myself with those kids who were smart, who knew accounting and maths and go to extra classes (Ntokozo, post-secondary student).

The narratives highlight the resilience and motivation of post-secondary foster youth in striving to improve their futures. They displayed strong aspirations and the agency to pursue their goals, reflecting the core principle of the capability approach, which emphasizes the importance of individuals' freedom to choose and act in alignment with their desired outcomes (Sen, 1993). These youth aimed for independence and

were motivated to achieve financial security, stable employment and personal success, showing an understanding of how education can help them achieve their goals. Studies by Hannon *et al.* (2017) in Ireland and Keung and Ho (2020) in Hong Kong similarly revealed that adolescents' capabilities emerged as a significant factor in enhancing their aspirations to achieve post-secondary outcomes. Galliot and Graham (2014) caution against viewing young people's limited aspirations as purely individual, emphasizing that the quality of education shapes their achievements. In South Africa, the legacy of Apartheid continues to affect schooling, and from a critical theory perspective, low aspirations among some school leavers reflect systemic inequalities, poor school environments, and low adult expectations that constrain opportunities and further limits the futures available to many young people.

These findings align with studies by Courtney *et al.* (2004), Perumal (2011), Schiller (2015) and Siyawareva (2019) who found foster youth often have high educational aspirations and a strong desire to succeed.

8.3 SUPPORTIVE AND NURTURING HOME ENVIRONMENTS

8.3.1 RELATIONSHIPS WITH FOSTER PARENTS

Foster parents are important in helping foster youth achieve successful educational outcomes. This includes providing emotional support, a stable home environment and educational assistance. Additionally, foster parents are instrumental in fostering motivation and working with the youth to plan for their future. From a capability perspective, the emotional support, stability, and educational assistance provided by foster parents enhance youth's agency and opportunities, allowing them to develop essential capabilities such as self-esteem, emotional regulation, and a sense of belonging. Schofield and Beek (2014) emphasize the crucial role that foster parents play in helping children develop trust, manage their emotions, build self-esteem, feel competent, and cultivate a sense of belonging. They add that when foster parents successfully nurture these attributes, foster youth are better equipped to navigate the various challenges, opportunities, and risks that they encounter in life. Additionally, foster parents can contribute to the foster youth's learning process by helping with school work and setting aside time to talk about school (Maarman & Lamont-Mbawuli, 2017).

Twelve school leavers and twelve post-secondary students reported having positive relationships with their foster parents. They described these bonds as close, with their foster mother essentially fulfilling the role of a mother. This aligns with the findings of Mampane and Ross (2017), Perumal (2011), Roux *et al.* (2010) and Van der Westhuizen (2012), where foster youth reported having supportive relationships with their foster parents. The youth further reported that their foster parents provided emotional support, were there for them and provided comfort. They appreciated having someone to talk to, although sometimes this did not extend to topics like dating and relationships. Asanda, a school leaver shared,

My grandmother is so friendly and kind, I discuss everything with her, if I have a problem.

However, not all the post-secondary students shared positive relationships with their foster parents. Two felt that their foster parents did not understand them and one shared that she was not able to share openly with her foster parent. Angel, a post-secondary student in an unrelated placement shared,

Sometimes she would be nice, I don't want to lie, sometimes it was bad.

Three school leavers also related that their foster parents did not provide them with emotional support and love. Mark, a school leaver in an unrelated placement had this to say,

There wasn't really a relationship; it was just like people that knew each other basically. I don't know how to describe it ... I couldn't just all of sudden take her as my mother and him as my father ... It was never a close relationship, we spoke but not how a mother and son should speak. You can't just now turn around and expect these foster parents to be your parents when you nothing alike.

These findings align with studies by Gerber and Dicker (2006) and Mlamla (2008) where foster youth reported a lack of emotional support from their foster parents.

All the foster parents in this study reported having close relationships with the foster youth in their care. Even those fostering youth who dropped out of school, exhibited behavioural problems, or abused substances emphasized the open and supportive bonds they shared with the youth. Foster parents in studies by Perumal (2011) and

Roux *et al.* (2010) also reported that they shared close relationships with their foster youth.

Foster youth, both school leavers and post-secondary students, had contrasting experiences and views of their relationships with their foster parents. While many youth felt that their foster parents provided emotional support and stability, a minority reported feeling unsupported. These mixed experiences reveal the structural and relational inequalities within the foster care system. However, foster parents consistently reported having close and supportive relationships with the foster youth. This discrepancy may be due to foster parents wanting to portray themselves in a positive light or being less aware of the challenges and negative experiences faced by some youth. The contradictions between youth and foster parents' experiences may stem from differences in perception, communication gaps, and individual circumstances. Recognizing these differences is critical for social workers to ensure that interventions genuinely enhance the relational and educational capabilities of foster youth.

8.3.2 ACADEMIC SUPPORT FROM FOSTER PARENTS

Thirteen of the foster youth who progressed to tertiary education reported that their foster parents encouraged their academic performance and motivated them. This included assisting them with homework and school projects if they could and celebrating academic achievements. Even when foster parents faced challenges due to their own lack of education or age, they ensured that other resources were available to support their foster children's educational needs. For instance, Samkelo's foster parent, an educator, noticed he was struggling in grade 10 at one school and transferred him to another where his academic performance improved. This school transfer allowed her to support him more effectively, as it was near the school where she taught. Similarly, Themba's foster parent encouraged him to dream of a successful future in art; he shared, *"my parents, they the ones that saw my passion for drawing and took me to the art gallery near City Hall"*. These actions exemplify the capability-enhancing role of foster parents, expanding opportunities for youth to pursue valued functionings despite systemic or personal limitations. Similarly, Maarman and Lamont-Mbawuli (2017), cite a study by Dass-Brailsford (2005) conducted in South Africa with

first-year university students from previously disadvantaged Black communities, that revealed the role of family support in motivating them to achieve success.

Eleven school leavers also shared that their foster parents encouraged and motivated them to focus on their academics. These foster parents were actively involved in efforts to get the youth readmitted to school. For instance, Akhona and Bandile recounted how their foster parents went to multiple schools in an attempt to get them re-enrolled, with one even reaching out to the DOE for assistance. This kind of support demonstrate that foster parents act as critical intermediaries in helping the youth in their care to achieve educational success, even if the youth themselves are not willing to return to school. Similarly, studies by Emerson & Lovitt (2003), Perumal (2011) and Schiller (2015) reveal that despite challenges such as low education levels and advanced age, foster parents remain supportive and help foster youth achieve positive educational outcomes.

However, not all foster youth experienced this level of support. Two post-secondary students, Siya and Angel, mentioned that their foster parents did not offer any academic support. Siya shared, *“my sister didn’t know much about accounting, business studies never went to varsity, so most of the things I struggled with, she didn’t relate much, my sister, never really motivated me”*. Three school leavers shared that their foster parents did not motivate them regarding their academics or returning to school. In contrast, Summer's (school leaver) foster parent had a different expectation, wanting her to complete her matriculation and then get married, as was customary for the women in their family. These findings suggest that this limited support from foster parents can impact negatively on the educational outcomes of foster youth. This aligns with studies by Gerber and Dicker (2006), Mlamla (2008) and Siyawareva (2019) where the foster youth related an absence of assistance and motivation by their foster parents in terms of their education.

All the foster parents in the focus groups and interviews emphasized their active support and encouragement for their foster youth's academic success. Foster parents mentioned that they celebrated their foster youth's successes at school, such as passing grades, sometimes with a small treat. The foster parents acknowledging and celebrating these successes are beneficial in boosting the foster youth's self-esteem and confidence, helping them to believe in their abilities.

Five foster parents caring for post-secondary students and two caring for school leavers admitted that due to their older age and lower levels of education, they struggled to assist with academic work, particularly as the youth advanced to secondary school. Despite these challenges, they indicated that when they could not provide direct help, there was often someone else in the home or neighbourhood who could step in to assist the foster youth. For example, Mrs Gumede caring for a post-secondary student related, *“at primary level, I was assisting, but as the grades went up, I was unable to help and she was going to other children where they formed study groups”*. Seven foster parents caring for post-secondary students and three caring for school leavers attended school meetings, demonstrating their commitment to being involved in the educational lives of their foster youth. Additionally, five foster parents caring for post-secondary students and seven caring for school leavers reported that they were able to engage in important discussions about the future with their foster youth. However, ten foster parents shared that financial difficulties hindered their ability to save for tertiary education. Mrs Kunene, who cares for a post-secondary student, reported, *“I didn’t keep any money for the child to go to tertiary.”* Similarly, Mrs Mkhize, also caring for a post-secondary student, shared, *“I didn’t save anything for my foster child, I put my trust in my daughter”*. This challenge of limited financial preparation for tertiary education has also been highlighted in previous studies (Lesea, 2017; Siyawareva, 2019).

The findings highlight the dual nature of foster parents' involvement in supporting foster youths' education. Many foster parents demonstrate dedication by motivating the youth, attending school meetings, and seeking community resources. However, challenges such as age, limited education, and financial constraints often hinder their ability to provide consistent support or save for tertiary education. Despite these obstacles, their commitment to fostering academic success aligns with prior research by Perumal (2011), Schiller (2015) and Skilbred *et al.* (2016). This underscores the need for additional resources to address the barriers faced by foster families.

Social workers also acknowledged that many foster parents are older and have lower levels of education, which impacts their ability to keep up with the demands of supporting their foster youth's education. As the youth progress through school, the

generational gap makes it harder for older foster parents to understand and assist with their homework or projects. Okuhle shared,

Most of our foster parents are old, so it's hard for them sometimes to assist these children as you know they are living in the modern times so sometimes there's this age gap. Most of the foster parents are old gogos [grandmothers], they never went to school at all.

The social workers also indicated that sometimes foster parents work long hours and struggle to balance work commitments with providing academic support at home. Conversely, other foster parents who have not completed their own education recognize its importance and insist that their foster children prioritize their studies. Social workers observed that many foster parents link the foster youth to family members or neighbours who can assist with their studies. Social workers suggested that foster parents increase their communication with schools as this will help them to better understand their foster children's academic progress and needs. This, in turn, can enable the schools to provide more targeted support and encouragement to the foster youth.

Although foster parents, foster youth, and social workers generally describe foster parents as supportive, as noted in the previous chapter, four post-secondary students and ten school leavers experienced abuse in foster homes, creating a non-supportive environment. This could have negatively impacted the educational outcomes of these youth. These findings align with several studies, including those by Dhludhlu (2021), Kantor *et al.* (2022), Landers *et al.* (2021), Mampane and Ross (2017), Mnisi and Botha (2016), Morton (2015b) and Pecora *et al.* (2010), which similarly found that experiences of abuse and neglect in foster homes affected the education of foster youth.

8.3.3 SUPPORT FROM FOSTER SIBLINGS AND OTHER FAMILY MEMBERS

Twenty-three foster youth shared that they lived with foster siblings and other family members. Six post-secondary students and seven school leavers reported being treated well, with foster families providing emotional support and assistance with schoolwork, as shared by Andiswa, school leaver,

We share a good relationship. We share things and we used to support each other.

On the other hand, four post-secondary students and six school leavers recounted negative experiences with other family members in the foster home. Ntombi, a post-secondary student shared,

At the moment we are always fighting because he drinks and he comes back to insult us.

Participants in a study by Mampane and Ross (2017) similarly shared feelings of unhappiness and being scapegoated in the foster home.

These findings reveal the mixed experiences of foster youth, with some having positive relationships with their foster families and others encountering difficulties. None of the youth disclosed their unhappiness to their social workers nor was this documented in the case records. Additionally, foster parents also did not report that the youth had poor relationships with their foster siblings or other household members, revealing a potential gap between youth experiences and adult perceptions.

The capability approach underscores the importance of fostering environments that enable individuals to realize their potential (Sen, 1993). In this context, foster parents contribute to enhancing the capabilities of foster youth to achieve desired educational outcomes. This involves making sure that foster youth have access to the resources, support, and environments necessary for educational achievements. The findings reveal that foster parents contributed to these capabilities by offering emotional support, stability, and motivation, which are important in building self-confidence, resilience, and a sense of belonging among foster youth. For example, Mrs Gumede shared, *“we did have talks, like I will ask her what she wants to become when she finishes school and also encourage her to apply so that she will go to tertiary after matric”*. Similarly, Mrs Mkhize motivated her foster child by saying, *“I always talk to her, if you go to tertiary you must behave yourself, you must learn your books because here in your books there is a lot of money in this”*. Hart and Brando (2018) emphasize that caregivers are important in enabling the freedom of children to take control of their lives and have a voice in decisions affecting them, within an environment that supports their physical, mental, and emotional well-being. These conditions are crucial for

children to achieve educational success. This sentiment is echoed by Keung and Ho (2020), whose study found that positive parental expectations significantly contribute to adolescents' desire to pursue post-secondary education.

However, foster parents, particularly those who are older, less educated, or financially strained, may struggle to provide the support that foster youth need. This underscores the necessity for systemic support, such as community resources or educational programmes, to assist both foster parents and foster youth in achieving their educational goals.

The findings in this study suggest a slight discrepancy between the perceptions of foster parents and the experiences of foster youth regarding the support they receive, suggesting a possible imbalance in this relationship. Foster parents may believe they are providing sufficient support, but the youths' accounts of feeling unsupported or misunderstood indicate that their voices and experiences may not be fully heard. Critical theory emphasizes the need to critically examine these relationships, encouraging social workers to listen to the perspectives of foster youth on their needs and experiences, ensuring that their voices are heard on issues that impact their lives. This open communication will enable better understanding between foster youth and their foster parents, improving their relationships and allowing issues to be discussed freely (Cimino, 2015; Fook & Gardner, 2007; Payne, 2014).

8.4 THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

8.4.1 SCHOOL PLACEMENTS

The discussion below provides a detailed analysis of the types of schools attended by foster youth, categorized according to South Africa's quintile system, and changes in their school placements. The quintile system, established to address educational disparities rooted in the Apartheid era, classifies schools based on the economic and social conditions of the communities they serve. Schools in quintiles 1-3 are located in poorer areas and do not charge fees, while those in quintiles 4-5 are in more affluent areas and are fee-paying (Carrim, 2013; Havemann, 2024; Maistry & Afrika, 2020; Ogbonnaya & Awuah, 2019; Van Dyk & White, 2019). The quintile designation of a

school is determined by factors such as income levels, unemployment rates, and literacy rates within its geographical area (Ogbonnaya & Awuah, 2019).

In terms of the learner distribution across the quintile system, Spaul (2019) points out that 85% of White students attend fee-paying schools, whereas 98% of learners in no-fee schools are Black or Coloured. This is echoed by Moses *et al.* (2017) who notes that the majority of South Africa's (mostly black) learners attend formerly black schools. This distribution demonstrates the ongoing socio-economic disparities in access to quality education and the parallel education system in South Africa, post democracy. From a critical theory view, this shows how inequality is reproduced, as reforms like the quintile system have not broken down past racial hierarchies but instead kept unequal access to resources in place.

The quintile status of the schools attended by the foster youth was sourced from the KZN Department of Education (2023). Notably, although the independent schools were included in the document, they were not included in the quintile system (KZN Department of Education, 2023).

8.4.1.1 POST-SECONDARY STUDENTS' SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

Primary School Education:

- Quintile 5 Schools: 6 foster youth
- Quintile 4 Schools: 1 foster youth
- Quintile 3 Schools: 6 foster youth
- Quintile 2 Schools: 2 foster youth

School Changes:

- Anele moved from a quintile 2 to a quintile 3 school.
- Samkelo moved from a quintile 3 to a quintile 5 school.
- Themba moved from a quintile 3 to a quintile 2 school.
- Siya changed schools but remained in a quintile 3 school.

Secondary School Education:

- Quintile 5 Schools: 1 foster youth

- Quintile 4 Schools: 5 foster youth
- Quintile 3 Schools: 7 foster youth
- Quintile 2 Schools: 1 foster youth
- Home schooling: 1 foster youth

School Changes:

- Anele moved from a quintile 3 to a quintile 4 school.
- Samkelo moved from a quintile 4 to a quintile 2 school.
- Andile left a quintile 5 school to pursue home schooling.
- Angel, Siya, and Lusanda changed schools but remained in quintile 3 schools.

8.4.1.2 SCHOOL LEAVERS' SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

Primary School Education:

- Quintile 4 Schools: 4 foster youth
- Quintile 3 Schools: 9 foster youth
- Quintile 2 Schools: 1 foster youth
- Independent school: 1 foster youth

School Changes:

- Summer moved from a quintile 3 to a quintile 4 school. She eventually attended a faith-based independent school.
- Asanda moved from a quintile 5 to a quintile 3 school.
- Olwethu moved from a quintile 4 to a quintile 3 school.
- Amy changed schools but remained at a quintile 4 school.

Secondary School Education:

- Quintile 4 Schools: 4 foster youth
- Quintile 3 Schools: 8 foster youth
- Quintile 2 Schools: 1 foster youth
- Independent schools: 2 foster youth

School Changes:

- Pearl changed schools but remained at a quintile 3 school.
- Akhona moved from a quintile 4 to a quintile 3 school.

From the information presented above, for those foster youth who progressed to tertiary education, seven attended fee-paying schools, while eight attended non-fee-paying schools during both their primary and secondary education. Among the school leavers, four attended fee-paying schools, ten attended non-fee-paying schools and one attended an independent faith-based school for their primary education. For secondary education, four school leavers attended fee-paying schools, nine attended non-fee-paying schools, and two attended independent faith-based schools.

These findings indicate that some post-secondary learners and school leavers had access to better-resourced fee-paying schools, which is somewhat unexpected given that some foster parents had indicated that they had applied for foster care to access the FCG, and the generally lower income levels of foster families. This is noteworthy because it challenges the expectation that foster youth, often from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, would predominantly attend non-fee-paying schools, which are typically less well-resourced.

However, it's important to note that this study was limited to the Pietermaritzburg area, and participants were selected from the case loads of CPOs working within that area. Furthermore, a supportive measure that exists for foster families is school fee exemptions, which case records reflected was accessed by the foster parents. The exemption from school fees, facilitated by the social workers, may have provided foster families with the opportunity to enrol foster youth in fee-paying schools, which are expected to achieve better educational outcomes due to more resources.

An important finding is that among the foster youth who advanced to tertiary education, the distribution between those who attended fee-paying schools and those who attended non-fee-paying schools is nearly even suggesting that the type of school (fee-paying vs. non-fee-paying) may not have been a decisive factor in their ability to progress to higher education. However, in contrast, the majority of school leavers attended non-fee-paying schools during both primary and secondary education.

Specifically, ten out of fifteen school leavers attended non-fee-paying schools for their primary education, and nine out of fifteen for their secondary education. A smaller number attended fee-paying schools, and two attended independent faith-based schools, suggesting that socioeconomic disadvantages may contribute to dropout, even in better resourced schools.

While the intent of the quintile system was to provide equitable education, there appears to be challenges in the implementation. Havemann (2024) notes that children in poorer schools, which are the quintile 1-3 schools and are mainly attended by Blacks are five grades behind their peers in wealthier schools and these schools have not been upgraded since Apartheid. This is echoed by Carrim (2013) who asserts that despite the efforts to distribute resources more equitably, many schools in rural and impoverished provinces continue to struggle with inadequate resources and infrastructure.

Studies by Moses *et al.* (2017), Ogonnaya and Awuah (2019), Spaul (2015) and Van Dyk and White (2019) collectively highlight the disparities in educational outcomes across different school quintiles in South Africa, with a clear advantage for learners attending higher quintile, fee-paying schools. Ogonnaya and Awuah (2019) found that Grade 12 learners in quintile 4 schools, which are fee-paying, achieved higher academic scores compared to those in quintile 1-3 schools, which are non-fee-paying. This suggests that the resources and quality of education available in quintile 4 schools contribute to better academic performance. Van Dyk and White (2019) further underline the challenges faced by learners in lower quintile schools, associating these schools with poor-quality education. Viewed through a critical theory lens, this connection between school quintile and educational quality is relevant, as it implies that learners in lower quintile schools are at a disadvantage due to inadequate resources and less effective educational environments.

Moses *et al.* (2017) expands on this by pointing out a large performance gap between quintile 5 schools, which are the most well-resourced and fee-paying, and the rest of the education system. The performance gap is particularly stark in quintile 1 and 2 schools, where only about one-third of learners who start Grade 1 are still on track by Grade 4, highlighting severe challenges in early education in these schools. Spaul (2015) further notes that, on average, White students outperform Black students in

South Africa, and this disparity is apparent in the performance gap between students attending quintile 5, fee-paying, or independent schools and those in lower quintile schools. These studies emphasize the role of socioeconomic factors and systemic inequalities in shaping educational outcomes. This points to the deeply rooted inequality in the education system, where the quality of education and academic performance are closely tied to the economic background of the school and its learners. Quintile 5 fee-paying schools are better equipped to provide high-quality education, leading to better academic outcomes, while learners in lower quintile schools face significant obstacles that hinder their academic progress.

Van Dyk and White (2019) further point out inaccuracies in the quintile ranking in urban and township schools in Gauteng, resulting in inadequate funding that affected school maintenance, learning, and teaching. Similarly, Maistry and Afrika (2020) reported that principals in non-fee-paying schools in Kwa-Zulu Natal struggled to manage their schools effectively. Dieltiens and Motala (2014) observed that the quintile system is based on the economic status of the school and its community. However, the children attending a particular school might not be from that area, complicating the system's effectiveness. All these authors suggest that the quintile system needs to be re-evaluated and improved to better serve its intended purpose.

According to Weybright *et al.* (2017), in South Africa, school dropout is a crisis as by Grade 12, only 52 % of learners are still enrolled. This is echoed by Havemann (2024) who points out that a child in South Africa only completes nine years of education. Havemann (2024) notes that in a group of 100 children, only 60 % will write matric, of which only 37 will pass. Soudien (2013) also reports that of the 1 019 795 learners who began grade 1 in 1998, only 537 543 wrote the grade 12 examinations in 2010, leaving 482 252 learners unaccounted for. The levels of drop-out rates in South Africa differ according to race, and is influenced by the previous policies of Apartheid (Hartnack, 2017; Spaull, 2015). According to the results of the 2011 General Household Survey, 40% of learners who commence school pass matric. In terms of race, 44% of Blacks and Coloureds, 83% of Indians and 88% of Whites attained matric (Spaull, 2015). Hunter and May (2011) and Sibanda (2004) highlight that in South Africa, females are more susceptible to leaving school compared to males. In this

study, although the sample size is small, a higher number of females dropped out of school.

The study's findings reveal several critical insights into the educational paths of foster youth, especially in light of South Africa's quintile system. Foster youth who progressed to tertiary education predominantly attended non-fee-paying schools (quintiles 2-3) for both primary and secondary education. Despite the economic challenges typically faced by foster families, a surprising number of foster youth attended quintile 4 and 5 schools, which are generally better resourced and fee-paying. The attendance at higher-quintile schools, even among economically disadvantaged youth, suggests that these environments may have better supported the development of capabilities necessary for academic success, reflective of the capability approach (Sen, 1993; Walker & Unterhalter, 2007).

Among those who dropped out, the majority attended non-fee-paying schools, with a few attending quintile 4 and private schools. Moses *et al.* (2017) argues that the educational gap between learners in quintile 1 and 2 schools and those in quintile 5 schools increases the risk of dropout among learners in the lower quintiles, due to poor performance and grade repetition in the higher grades. Furthermore, they add that learners in the quintile 1 to 3 schools also struggle to reach matric and pass with a Bachelor's pass. A study by Branson *et al.* (2014) further reveals that approximately 80% of learners in the richest quintile schools progressed as compared to the 60% in the poorest quintile schools progressing. The study also reflected that the dropout rate is higher in the lower quintile schools across all grades. The study's results reveal that the majority of school leavers attended lower-quintile schools and points to systemic inequities that limit the educational outcomes for the most vulnerable populations, also noted by Carrim (2013), Havemann (2024), Maistry and Afrika (2020), Ogbonnaya and Awuah (2019) and Van Dyk and White (2019).

From a capability lens, the quality of education a learner receives, particularly in literacy, mathematics, and scientific training, plays a crucial role in developing their capabilities related to senses, imagination, and thought, enabling them to express themselves freely on various matters (Nussbaum, 2003). DeCesare (2014) further argues that a supportive school environment can enhance children's voices, encouraging them to consider their capabilities and the kind of life they value, not only

for themselves but also for those around them. However, Kelly (2012) raises concerns about whether learners truly have the freedom to choose schools that will foster their educational progress and capabilities. This question is particularly pertinent in South Africa, given the legacy of Apartheid, and whether students genuinely possess the freedom, choices, and voices in their schooling. Viewed from a critical theory perspective, these concerns reflect deep inequalities and power imbalances in the education system that limit real choice, exclude learners, and make it harder for especially marginalised students to reach their potential.

8.4.2 SCHOOL MOBILITY

The case load analysis and interviews with foster youth, their foster parents and social workers revealed diverse placement circumstances and school placements. Ten youth had always lived with their foster parents, while another ten moved in with foster parents following the death of their parents. Five foster youth were removed from their caregivers, and five entered foster care due to abandonment. Despite these varied placement circumstances, the educational experiences of the youth showed some commonalities for both school leavers and post-secondary students in terms of school mobility. Nine youth attended two primary schools, and one attended three primary schools. The remainder of the youth remained at the same primary school throughout their primary education. Regarding secondary education, eight youth attended two secondary schools, two transitioned to independent schools, and one was home schooled. The rest of the youth attended a single secondary school. These findings illustrate that most foster youth experienced a degree of stability in their schooling, despite the varied circumstances of their placements. The data suggest that school mobility was not a predominant factor contributing to poor educational outcomes for the school leavers in this study. This stability in schooling can be viewed as a positive factor in the development of the foster youth's capabilities that may have contributed to their educational success (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007).

However, while the overall picture shows some stability, it is important to note the individual experiences of those who did face multiple school changes. Three youth that had dropped out of school and two that had progressed to tertiary education struggled with the medium of instruction when they changed schools. For example, Angel, a post-secondary student, shared her experience of changing schools. "*when I*

went to Smero, IsiZulu was home language and it was hard for me to move from first additional language to home language, it was really hard". Similarly, Olwethu, a school leaver, reflected on his struggles, saying, "it was challenging because I didn't know how to speak English and I didn't know how to write, and I had to do that from grade three". The findings show that school mobility was not a major issue for most foster youth in this study, but those who did struggle highlight gaps in the education system. From a capability view, stable schooling helps foster youth to learn and grow, but moving schools without enough support limits their chances to achieve. From a critical theory perspective, this shows how systemic inequalities remain, placing the pressure to adapt on vulnerable learners instead of changing schools to meet their needs.

The findings of this study contrast sharply with international research, which consistently shows that foster youth experience high school mobility and this negatively affects their education. Studies by Clemens *et al.* (2016), Emerson and Lovitt (2003), Pears *et al.* (2015), Pecora *et al.* (2010) and Sandh *et al.* (2020) reveal the detrimental impact of frequent school changes on the academic outcomes of foster youth. In these international studies, high rates of school mobility were associated with lower academic achievement, disrupted learning processes, and weakened social ties. Foster youth who experienced frequent school changes often faced challenges such as gaps in curriculum continuity, difficulties in adapting to new educational environments, and the loss of supportive relationships with teachers and peers. This contrast may be influenced by the study's limited sample size.

8.4.3 THE ROLE OF EDUCATORS

Educators are valuable in supporting foster youth and are essential in promoting their educational success. They can offer a supportive and encouraging environment for the youth and be the constant figure, which may be lacking in other areas of the youths' lives. Educators can give personalised attention, offer extra classes and be sensitive to the unique circumstances of foster youth, which can help them to overcome challenges, achieve their academic goals and reach their full potential. According to Hart and Brando (2018), educators have a valuable role in supporting the development of children's freedoms, competencies and achievements that will ultimately improve educational outcomes.

Twelve of the youth who advanced to tertiary education reported having positive and supportive relationships with their educators. Angel shared,

They were nice, they understood what I was going through, they understood everything that I told them I was going through at my home. Because they supported me, I rented a room near my school when I was doing matric, so that I would attend after school because there were classes that I was attending 5 to 7pm so there was no transport at that time, they were buying groceries for me, so I had no stress by that time.

These findings align with studies by Johnson *et al.* (2020), McGuire *et al.* (2021) and Schroeter *et al.* (2015), which reveal that many foster youth had positive and supportive relationships with their educators, contributing to their educational success.

On the other hand, three of the fifteen post-secondary students, reported that their educators were distant and uninvolved in their academic work, pointing to a lack of connection between educators and the learners. Themba shared, “*teachers don’t really like associate themselves with us. We kind of like on our own. They are like strangers*”. These findings align with studies by Johnson *et al.* (2020) and Moyer and Goldberg (2020), where some youth reported experiencing low expectations and negative labelling from educators, which adversely affected their educational success. Participants in the study by Siyawareva (2019) also shared a lack of support and commitment from their educators that hindered their academic progress. This lack of support would have impacted negatively on the aspirations of foster youth to achieve the personal goals that they value (Hart & Brando, 2018).

Only four school leavers mentioned having good relationships with their educators, with some even receiving extra classes during breaks, suggesting that this positive relationship can be a beneficial one. Summer shared, “*there was one teacher that used to check up on me and he will tell me to come lunch break and he can explain the work to me*”. Eleven youth reported having poor or no relationships with their teachers. For instance, Mark felt he was viewed negatively, and recalled being labelled “problem child”, and believed the teachers were only interested in getting paid, regardless of teaching quality. This illustrates how being labelled negatively can affect a student's self-perception and suggests that educator attitudes and perceptions can

influence student experiences. Three foster youth admitted to being rude to the teachers, disruptive, and often absconded from school eventually leading to their expulsion. Bandile related, *“I was rude to teachers because I wanted the class to see me as the boss at the time”*. These findings emphasize the critical role of the student-educator relationships in student engagement and retention. Positive relationships can foster a supportive learning environment, while negative interactions can contribute to disengagement and possibly dropout.

The findings reveal that foster parents generally have positive relationships with educators, who are supportive in the academic and personal development of foster youth. Educators provided valuable assistance through extra lessons, meal provisions, and communication about behavioural and academic concerns that are crucial in addressing the diverse needs of foster youth.

While foster parents generally reported positive relationships with educators, they also encountered challenges. These challenges stem from both the school environment and the educators' attitudes and actions as noted in the following response by Mrs Mjwara, Samkelo's foster parent,

When he was at school he would be like very quiet, not talk, teachers thought he was somehow abused, like he had a very big problem, maybe he will kill himself. He was not like that at home. I think it was the environment. I was not happy in a way that they treated him. Because when I went to school this other day the teacher and the other teacher they were talking, this is the parent of xxx and they used a word. I cannot remember, but I picked up from the conversation between these two teachers that they have created some sort of a name that they were calling him. But I did not address that with the teachers

Mrs Mjwara's account reveals how her foster youth struggled to adjust to a new school environment, which included racial differences and a perceived lack of sensitivity from educators. The youth's quietness was misinterpreted as a sign of abuse, leading to concerns about his well-being. Additionally, derogatory remarks made by teachers strained the relationship.

Both Mrs Duma and Mrs Sibiya, caring for youth that dropped out of school, shared that the educators refused to accept their youth at school because of their rudeness and disrespectfulness. Mrs Sibiya related, “*they told me they are not going to take him because he was rude and they did not take him*”. Despite attempts to communicate and seek assistance, the educators' refusal to accept the youth back into school led to the involvement from social workers and the DOE. This reveals a lack of supportive strategies for dealing with behavioural issues within the school environment.

Ms Chiya and Ms Mchunu felt that the school should have been more supportive to their foster youth who dropped out of school. They asserted that the schools did not provide adequate support or intervention for their foster youth who were struggling academically and behaviourally. For example Mr Chiya shared, “*whenever I go to school they will ask me, what is his problem? Why is he not passing? I will tell them I don't know what the problem is. They didn't offer assistance*”. Their accounts indicate that educators were quick to point out problems but did not offer concrete assistance or early intervention strategies that could have helped improve the foster youths' outcomes. While educators were supportive to foster parents, there are gaps in the way they handled complex situations involving foster youth. The challenges faced by foster parents, ranging from cultural insensitivity and negative labelling to outright rejection and a lack of intervention, underscores the need for more training and support systems within schools to respond to the complex needs of foster youth.

The foster parents shared that educators need to be more understanding of the circumstances of foster youth, considering their diverse backgrounds and home situations and not to be made to feel different from their peers. Ms Chiya suggested that the school maintain a file on each child to track their academic progress. This will enable educators to identify struggles early and assist the youth accordingly. Similarly, foster parents in the study by Moyer and Goldberg (2020) related a range of experiences with educators, with some educators being supportive of both the foster parents and foster youth, while others lacked insight into the difficulties encountered by foster youth.

In discussing the role of educators, social workers unanimously agreed on their vital role in assisting foster youth to achieve positive educational outcomes. This suggests the need for a collaborative approach involving educators, foster parents, and social

workers to address the unique needs of foster children. Educators need to communicate more openly with foster parents and social workers regarding educational issues. Social workers also shared that foster parents must communicate openly with the educators and alert them that youth are in foster care, especially because some of them are not able to help the youth academically. If educators are aware that youth are in foster care, they can offer them support and also contact the social worker if there are concerns. Social workers also felt that if foster parents informed the school that the youth is in foster care, the educators will not be surprised if the social workers visited the child at school and be more discreet regarding issues pertaining to the child. Social workers also shared that there needs to be open communication between themselves and the educators, as this will help when youth are not performing well, presenting with behaviour problems or not attending school. The social workers indicated that there are some educators who are able to reach out and address the progress of the youth and identify how the youth can be assisted.

While some educators are proactive in contacting social workers and foster parents, others are less supportive. Mandy pointed out that some educators do not adequately support foster youth and shared "*some of them feel that because foster kids are foster kids, there's this stigma attached to them, and they shouldn't progress, so they don't.*" Additionally, some social workers shared that educators often lacked the training to recognize learning difficulties early and offer appropriate academic guidance or additional classes.

Social workers advocated for mandatory training for educators to better understand and support foster children who have experienced trauma and loss and emphasized the need for the DOE to provide training to educators. Joanne shared "*I think they need to know that there are different children from different backgrounds and there are foster children. So, I think they need more training on that on how to treat children, understanding that there are children that are in foster care*".

Social workers recommended that this training be integrated into the educator's qualifications and should cover recognizing signs of abuse and neglect and understanding the diverse backgrounds of foster children. To provide immediate and ongoing support, social workers suggested that schools should employ social workers

on-site. This presence would enable timely intervention and support for foster youth without waiting for educator referrals.

Social workers also pointed out the influence of the school environment on foster children. Enhle shared, *"there's so much influence from the school, from how the children are. Like the bag the child carries to the shoes the child wears. Children want to be like other children. Most of their behaviours and wanting to belong come from the school"*, suggesting that that peer pressure and the desire to fit in can impact foster children's behaviour and self-esteem. Busani highlighted the role of school policies and administration in maintaining a safe and conducive learning environment, and pointed out that some schools were able to offer a safe and conducive learning environment, while others struggled to maintain order in the school. This may be attributed to the allocation of resources according to the quintile systems discussed earlier.

Social workers in Dhludhlu's (2017) study similarly shared a lack of support from educators and the education system for foster youth and foster parents. However, Dhludhlu's subsequent study (2021) highlighted that the school and education system served as coping mechanisms for foster youth, suggesting a possible improvement in the level of support. The collaboration between social workers and educators is noted in several studies (Smith, 2011; Stone *et al.*, 2006; Zetlin *et al.*, 2005). Additionally, it is proposed that schools appoint social workers to address the emotional needs of learners (Pretorius, 2020; Reyneke, 2020; Vergottini & Weyers, 2020).

The findings reveal a complex picture of the relationships between foster youth, their educators, and their foster parents, highlighting both positive and negative aspects of these interactions. This study indicates that positive relationships between foster youth and their educators can contribute to educational success. Educators who provide emotional and practical support help foster youth overcome challenges and reach their academic potential. The supportive actions of educators, such as offering extra classes, buying groceries, and providing emotional support, create a nurturing environment that fosters a sense of stability and belonging. This is particularly important for foster youth who often lack consistent support in other areas of their lives. By providing a supportive and encouraging environment for foster youth, educators contribute to expanding the capabilities of foster youth, allowing them to achieve

valuable functionings such as academic success and personal development (Sen, 1993, Walker and Unterhalter, 2007).

Conversely, the findings also highlight the detrimental impact of poor relationships between foster youth and their educators. Educators being distant, uninvolved, or dismissive can lead to a lack of connection and support, adversely affecting the youth's educational experience. Similarly, the negative labelling and low expectations can also influence foster youth's self-esteem and academic performance. The negative experiences shared by foster youth and their foster parents highlight broader issues of stigma, discrimination, and a lack of sensitivity within the educational environment, reflecting critical theory's view that schools often mirror the inequalities and hierarchies present in society. Van Dyk and White (2019) emphasize the importance of improving the conditions of learning for all learners that focus on the school culture, school climate and the social-emotional development of all learners. Hart and Brando (2018) further note that educators need to critically reflect on their perceptions and attitudes towards the well-being of children. This will enable educators to be better equipped to support learner's well-being, freedoms and achievements.

8.4.4 EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND AND SKILLS

The findings indicate that nine school leavers faced academic challenges that began in primary school and persisted into secondary school. An analysis of case records and school documents revealed these early struggles. Interestingly, despite the documented difficulties, many of these youth reported performing well in primary school, presenting a contrast to the school records. Additionally, six school leavers and seven post-secondary learners reported encountering academic struggles during their secondary school years. The contrast between youth self-reports and school records also points to how young people may seek to preserve a sense of achievement, even when systemic barriers constrain their progress.

Various factors contributed to the academic challenges faced by foster youth, which are discussed below:

8.4.4.1 SPECIAL LEARNING NEEDS

Five of the foster youth who had dropped out of school had special learning needs that were not timeously addressed by the different role players.

Wanda, Kwanele and Senzo shared that they struggled from primary school, despite attending extra classes and getting assistance from other people. The case records indicate that the school had arranged for Senzo to see an educational psychologist. However, when his foster father sought admission to a special school, he was informed that the child was too young, so the child continued attending the mainstream school despite these challenges. The child remained in the mainstream school until he eventually dropped out. Mrs Sibiya had this to say about her struggles to have her foster child Bandile admitted to a special school,

We went to Newton. So, at Newton they said I must bring the report so they can check. Because I was just thinking maybe he was belonging to that school, the way he acts in that school. When they check his report, they said he is normal. They don't have the space for him.

According to Moses *et al.* (2017), many learners face educational challenges as early as primary school, which can hinder their ability to engage in meaningful learning later on. These challenges often include difficulties with numeracy and literacy. The experiences of Wanda, Kwanele, and Senzo illustrate that they were deprived of opportunities to develop essential educational capabilities, such as literacy, numeracy, and critical thinking skills that Nussbaum (2003) emphasizes as crucial in the educational environment. From a critical theory perspective, the fact that primary school difficulties are often unaddressed reveals systemic neglect, impacting the learner's progress. This also underscores that despite the implementation of the quintile system to address inequalities in the education system, the persistent lack of resources and quality education in lower quintile schools requires urgent attention (Ogbonnaya & Awuah, 2019; Van Dyk & White, 2019).

The social workers also noted that some youth faced challenges in mainstream schooling and are slow learners. They emphasized the importance of identifying children with special learning needs. Enhle said,

It is very important to identify at early stages because you can see the school report, there is no progress at all. And then you will find a child in grade ten, grade eleven. When you look at all these reports there was never any progress, but no one was able to identify there is something that will go wrong.

Enhle shared that she identified numerous foster youth with special needs and facilitated their enrolment in special schools. These schools provided them with practical skills that enhanced their prospects of securing employment.

The social workers emphasized that foster parents, educators, and social workers play an important role in identifying when a child is struggling at school. Amahle noted that foster parents should be the first to notice if a child is not performing well, as they live with the child and are responsible for monitoring their homework and reports. However, social workers also noted that sometimes foster parents are reluctant to accept that their foster child has special learning needs. Unathi related, *“I had a case, the mum was denying like my child is fine ... We tried and tried and tried ... We need to send the child to a school to equip her with whatever skills that she can get. But a lot of parents will not accept their child needs special schools”*.

Social workers also advised exercising caution when foster parents report that a child has special needs, as in some cases these reports may be motivated by the desire to access the care dependency grant provided for children with mental or physical disabilities. One social worker shared an instance where a foster parent insisted that the child was a slow learner and should attend a special school, knowing that children in such schools could access a care dependency grant. However, after a meeting with the foster parent and the child, and with the foster parent becoming more involved in assisting with schoolwork, the child's performance improved. Sphila advised as follows, *“so, it is very important to also speak with the foster parent and also to be careful before we send the children to the special schools, because sometimes other children are still being naughty because they are still young, they still growing, they are not paying attention to their school work”*.

Therefore, social workers need to conduct thorough investigations when they are informed that a child is struggling academically. The school and educators also play a crucial role in identifying and assisting learners with special needs. However, Enhle

points out that social workers often face difficult situations when a report indicates a child is being promoted, despite the low marks in the report. Joey added that schools are failing to recognize when children have learning challenges. This contrasts with Lesea's (2017) study, which found that social work participants reported educators' awareness of children's special learning needs, but noted that these children were not referred for intervention.

Joanne suggested, *“I think we need to work more with the DOE and understand their rules and regulations. And as they always say that they promoting the child due to age. I think if we work with them, in that we can understand why they doing that”*.

Social workers expressed diverse perspectives on their roles in identifying and assisting slow learners, as reflected in some of their responses,

I think a multidisciplinary team is very important. It's the social workers and the schools working with the hospitals, psychologists and psychiatrists (Joanne, social worker)

I think it is the social worker's responsibility to speak to the foster parent or the school to get some sort of a letter from the school to say that the child has some sort of a learning disability before we can then present that letter to a psychologist that we work with ... Once that assessment is done and then it is found that the child has a learning disability then the social worker starts to look at schools that are available to for the child and then you place the child in that school (Busani, social worker).

Social workers also indicated that there are limited resources available for foster youth with special needs, as they rely on the FCG. Foster parents often cannot afford private psychologists and must use state facilities, which have long waiting lists for consultations. Previously, the DOE had a specialized unit that focused on children with special needs, which schools could call upon to assess children with learning difficulties. This unit provided assessments and reports to assist in the child's placement. However, social workers reported that this unit appears to no longer exist as they have not been able to access these services. Even after being assessed by psychologists, social workers noted that it can take up to a year for a youth to be placed in a special state school.

The experiences of foster youth with special learning needs, as revealed in this study, reveal a gap in the timely identification and support of these needs. The foster youth who eventually dropped out of school faced challenges that were not addressed by the various role players, including educators, social workers, and foster parents. This delay in addressing special learning needs had consequences for the educational outcomes of the youth. Their narratives underscore the crucial need for early identification and intervention for children with special learning needs. However, as the social workers in this study noted, such identification often comes too late, if at all. Enhle's observation that some children make no progress throughout their schooling years, only to have their learning difficulties recognized when they reach grades ten or eleven, reflects a systemic failure in the educational and social support systems.

These findings align with several studies that highlight a delay in identifying and appropriately placing foster youth who require special education. As a result, these youth often remain in mainstream schooling longer than necessary, and sometimes are not even placed in special schools (Courtney *et al.*, 2004; Lips, 2007; Morton, 2015a; Moyer & Goldberg, 2020). In the South African context, Maarman and Lamont-Mbawuli (2017) propose a multidisciplinary approach that identifies learners' needs and challenges, directing them to the appropriate services for support. This team would include educators, parents, social workers, and psychologists. However, for this approach to be effective, government investment in such a multidisciplinary intervention programme is essential to enhance educational outcomes. Moses *et al.* (2017) emphasize the importance of early interventions to address significant learning gaps that emerge in children's school careers. Spaul (2015) supports this view, citing research from the National Income Dynamics Study (NIDS) that found one reason for high dropout rates is that learners fall behind in school and struggle to catch up. Even when learners repeat grades, the issue persists, as schools often lack the resources needed to support those who are behind. This underscores the urgent need to enhance the quality of education in schools to better address these challenges.

Overall, the findings show that foster youth with special learning needs were often denied the support they needed to succeed in school. Viewed from a capability perspective, this means they were deprived of basic educational freedoms and the chance to reach goals they valued. From a critical theory view, it highlights how

ongoing inequalities in the South African education system, shaped by limited resources, bureaucratic barriers, and the legacy of Apartheid, continue to marginalise the most vulnerable learners.

8.4.4.2 GRADE REPETITION AND PROGRESSING YOUTH INTO THE NEXT GRADE

An important finding was that all the youth who had dropped out of school had failed either a term or one or more grades in both primary and secondary schools. Additionally, four foster youth who progressed to tertiary education had also failed either a term or a grade. This issue did not come up during the interviews with the youth; rather, it emerged from an analysis of case records and school reports, which showed multiple instances of academic failure. This aligns with the findings of Lesea's (2017) study, in which social work participants reported that foster youth often have poor academic performance and repeated grades frequently. Branson *et al.* (2014), Gustafsson (2011) and Spaul (2015) further observe that, in South Africa, learner progression through school is generally slow, with high rates of grade repetition throughout the educational system.

Four foster parents in this study confirmed that the youth in their care had repeated grades, as reflected in their responses. Ms Mchunu, Olwethu's foster parent, stated, "*he used to fail before he passes. Most of the grades*". Wanda's foster parent, Ms Chiya similarly shared "*he did not do well in school even from primary up until secondary because he was not passing*".

Repeating grades multiple times resulted in foster youth being older than their classmates, which caused them embarrassment. Wanda, a school leaver shared,

I just wasn't coping, and whenever I failed I had issues going back next year because I knew that other students were going to be laughing at me because of repeating in class.

Foster parents also noted that the youth felt embarrassed to return to school, particularly when their younger siblings reached the same grade. These findings are consistent with Mlamba's (2008) study, in which adolescent participants reported dropping out of school due to the embarrassment of being the oldest and tallest in their classes.

An important finding was that ten school leavers and two post-secondary students were progressed into a higher grade despite not meeting the academic requirements. School reports indicated that these youth often failed the first three terms but were passed in the fourth term, normally with a note stating they were promoted due to a DOE policy allowing for their condonement. The promotion requirements for learners are outlined in the National Policy on the Programme and Promotion Requirements for Grades R–12 (RSA, 2013). However, a subsequent circular issued in 2019 introduced a special condonation for learners in Grades 7–9, specifically related to the marks obtained in Mathematics. This adjustment was made after the DOE recognized that the strict mathematics criteria were negatively affecting learners' pass rates (Department of Basic Education, 2019).

Similarly, Mlamla's (2008) study revealed that participants were progressed despite lacking a solid educational foundation. Likewise, the study by Moyer and Goldberg (2020) noted that foster youth were progressed, even if they did not meet the necessary academic requirements. Foster parents expressed similar concerns, as noted in the response below,

He did not do well in school even from primary up until secondary because he was not passing, he was just being pushed to another grade all the time (Ms Chiya, Wanda's foster parent)

Similarly, social workers in the study by Lesea (2017) expressed that foster youth were being progressed to the next grade, even if they did not meet the requirements. Enhle related, *"it's like waiting until the child is in like grade 10 or 11 and when you look at all the reports, this child was always not passing and then at the end of the year, they like passing, passing not because they passing, because they being passed"*. Unathi addressed this concern with the teacher, *"with this one, the teacher we addressed it and then she said no it is because of the Department. Because I asked, the child can't even spell mum, but how come the child is in grade three. And if you look at the report, the child is passing, like he doing well at school, but the child can't even write his name. And then they just say no, they have to do it. So, they have to push the child to the next grade"*.

These findings show that practices such as automatic progression and grade repetition reflect deeper inequalities in the education system. Viewed through a critical theory

lens, these policies often prioritise bureaucratic goals over the real learning needs of vulnerable youth, reproducing cycles of disadvantage and sustaining the hierarchies of South Africa's unequal education system. From a capability approach, both grade repetition and social promotion limit the development of essential skills like literacy, numeracy, and self-confidence. Although progression may seem to create opportunities, it often leaves foster youth without the tools to succeed in further education or employment. To expand their real freedoms, targeted resources, tailored teaching, and psychosocial support are needed to ensure foster youth receive genuine opportunities to thrive (Gustafsson, 2019; Spaul, 2015; Walker & Unterhalter, 2007).

8.4.5 EXTRA-CURRICULAR INVOLVEMENT

Extracurricular activities are important in the lives of foster youth, offering benefits that extend well beyond academic achievements. A notable observation was that eleven foster youth who progressed to tertiary education actively participated in a range of extracurricular activities, from sports to various clubs available in their schools. For example, Anele excelled at netball, which led to her being scouted and offered a scholarship to another school. She continued playing netball even at the university level. Andile was involved in several different sports and represented his school at various sporting events. Mandisa was part of the peace club at school, where they were invited to other schools to promote peace. Her involvement in the club provided her with the opportunity to engage in important social issues and to meet others from different backgrounds. These stories highlight that extracurricular activities offered foster youth many benefits such as enhanced self-esteem and leadership skills and the opportunity to build positive relationships.

Among the foster youth who dropped out of school, only three had participated in extracurricular activities. This limited involvement restricted the opportunities of the majority of the school leavers to form positive friendships, develop crucial life skills, and benefit from the supportive structures these activities provide.

The findings reveal that post-secondary students were more engaged in extracurricular activities, while only a small number of school leavers participated in such activities. Viewed through the lens of the capability approach, foster youth who actively participated in extracurricular activities were afforded the freedom to choose

and pursue what they valued, demonstrating their ability to work towards their educational goals (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007). From a critical theory perspective, the disparity in access underscores how structural inequalities in the South African education system, such as the effects of the quintile system, under-resourced schools, and bureaucratic barriers, limit the educational experiences of foster youth. These constraints reproduce cycles of marginalisation, where vulnerable learners are systematically excluded from the benefits that more privileged students enjoy (Ogbonnaya & Awuah, 2019; Van Dyk & White, 2019).

Studies by Mihalec-Adkins and Cooley (2020), Moyer and Goldberg (2020) and Schroeter *et al.* (2015) also reveal that foster youth benefitted from participating in extracurricular activities. These activities enhanced their skills and expanded their support networks. However, foster youth sometimes encounter barriers to participating in extra-curricular activities as noted by youth in the study by Lesea (2017), who did not have the financial means to participate.

8.5 PEERS AND FRIENDS

Peers and friends play a crucial role, particularly during adolescence and can either be supportive or exert a negative influence (Berk, 2018; Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2015).

Twelve foster youth who advanced to tertiary education reported positive experiences with their friends and peers. These friendships served as a vital support system, providing someone to talk to and encouraging academic excellence. For example, Pamela shared, “*my friends were always there for me. Even when I was facing difficulties, there were there for me*”. Some youth mentioned having few friends, but those they did have were supportive and even assisted with school projects. These findings align with studies by Mcguire *et al.* (2021), Heyman *et al.* (2020) and Johnson *et al.* (2020), where some youth indicated that they shared supportive relationships with their friends.

On the other hand, eight foster youth who had dropped out of school reported that their friends were a negative influence. Five school leavers shared that they tried to fit in, sought popularity, and aimed to impress their peers, leading them to abuse

substances and skip school. John related, “*me and my friends we started jumping over fences, bunking classes. Doing all those wrong things what we weren’t supposed to do*”. The findings reveal a difference between the influence of friendships on youth who progressed to tertiary education and those who dropped out of school. For those who progressed academically, friendships largely served as a positive support system. These relationships provided emotional support, encouragement for academic excellence, and assistance with school projects. Despite occasional negative influences, such as substance abuse and truancy, the overall impact of friends on youth who progressed to tertiary education was beneficial and helpful in their educational success.

Conversely, youth who left school experienced mainly negative influences from their friends. Their desire to fit in and gain popularity led to substance abuse, truancy, and disrespectful behaviour toward educators. This negative peer influence may have contributed to their lack of interest in their academics and eventually leaving school. Additionally, some foster youth engaged in rule-breaking behaviours due to negative peer pressure. Similarly, some participants in the studies by Clemens *et al.* (2017) and Mcguire *et al.* (2021) reported foster children having had negative relationships with peers and friends.

Five foster parents caring for school leavers parents also shared concerns about the negative influence of friends and peers on their foster children. Mrs Duma shared this about her foster youth, Akhona, “*when they see their peers wearing names like Adidas, and when I tell them that I can’t afford the expensive clothes, they look at me straight in the eye and say but you are earning our money*”. Similarly, Mrs Sibiya disclosed that her foster youth, Bandile, ran away from home to be with friends who were abusing substances. Three foster parents caring for post-secondary students shared that they addressed the issue of friendships and peers by having conversations with their foster youth about their poor choice of friends, which ultimately led to the youth ending these friendships.

Social workers in the focus groups also emphasized that foster youth, in their desire to belong, often made poor choices regarding friends, leading to negative influences and behaviours. Similarly, Mlamlala (2008) and Zetlin *et al.* (2004) noted in their studies that peer pressure has a negative impact on youth. Participants in Mlamlala's (2008)

study reported that peer pressure contributed to school dropouts, substance abuse, and engagement in criminal and deviant behaviour.

From a capability perspective, positive friendships supported foster youths' well-being by giving them the social support needed to achieve goals they valued, including doing well in school, while negative peer influence limited their choices and undermined their educational progress. Viewed through a critical theory lens, these findings also show how systemic issues, such as poverty, inequality, and lack of school-based supports like mentorship and extracurricular activities, create environments where harmful peer groups thrive, pushing foster youth toward risky networks and reinforcing cycles of exclusion and school dropout. Overall, while friendships can be a powerful source of resilience and academic success, they can also lead to harmful behaviours that derail educational outcomes, highlighting the need for school environments that actively support foster youth in developing healthy peer relationships through access to extracurricular activities, counselling, and mentorship programmes.

8.6 CONCLUSION

The educational outcomes of foster youth are influenced by various factors that either contribute to or impede their academic success. The capability approach underscores the importance of providing individuals with the necessary resources and support to fully develop their educational capabilities. Many foster youth in this study demonstrated resilience, motivation and high aspirations, especially when supported by a stable and nurturing home environment. These individuals were able to expand their capabilities and make choices that led to higher education, similar to findings by Hannon *et al.* (2017) and Keung and Ho (2020). The positive role of the foster parents in providing a supportive environment to strengthen the capabilities of foster youth and the positive support of educators, friends and peers was also noted.

However, the persistent inequalities within the education system in South Africa, as evidenced by the limited access to quality education and resources, suggest that foster youth, and similarly disadvantaged youth are deprived of educational opportunities. The findings indicate that early learning challenges, compounded by inadequate interventions, result in significant learning gaps that disadvantaged learners, including foster youth struggle to overcome. High rates of grade repetition and eventual school

dropout highlight that the system is not equipped to support those who fall behind, even within the broader population. Despite efforts to address these issues through policies like the quintile system, the continued disparity in educational quality between different schools perpetuates these challenges. The lack of equitable access to quality education and resources limits their ability to pursue educational goals. To break this cycle, there is an urgent need for more holistic and targeted interventions that not only address the immediate educational needs of foster youth but also tackle the underlying structural inequalities that hinder their success. Strengthening the quality of education, particularly in lower quintile schools, and ensuring equitable access to resources are crucial steps towards developing a more just and positive educational environment for both foster youth and other disadvantaged learners.

The study found that social workers assisted foster parents to secure admission for foster youth into quintile 4 and 5 schools, which are known to offer a higher quality of education. However, despite these efforts and the review of school reports by social workers, their involvement had limited impact on improving the educational outcomes of foster youth. The findings underscore the need for a more holistic and integrated approach from social workers, to support the educational needs of foster youth, beyond school placement and performance monitoring.

CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

9.1 INTRODUCTION

This study aimed to gain a comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence successful educational outcomes for foster youth. Given the complexity of the topic, a comparative collective case study design was employed, allowing for the selection of multiple cases to capture diverse perspectives. Data collection included semi-structured interviews with foster youth who either progressed to tertiary education or dropped out of school. Additionally, semi-structured interviews and focus groups were conducted with their foster parents and social workers, complemented by an in-depth analysis of their case files. The research was guided by the capability approach and critical theory, with the combination of these frameworks providing valuable insights into the educational outcomes of foster youth.

The main objectives of the study were to:

- ✓ Compare the life experiences of youth in foster care with successful educational outcomes with those who have exited the FCS and have not attained such success.
- ✓ Discern the factors that contribute to the attainment of positive educational outcomes for foster youth and those factors that impede successful outcomes.
- ✓ Understand the role of foster parents in the attainment of educational outcomes for youth who are in or have been in foster care.
- ✓ Understand the role of social workers in the attainment of educational outcomes for foster youth who are in or have been in foster care.

This chapter presents the major conclusions of the study followed by recommendations.

9.2 MAJOR CONCLUSIONS

The study successfully compared the life experiences of foster youth who achieved positive educational outcomes with those who exited the FCS without much success. Through this comparison, key factors that facilitate or hinder educational attainment among foster youth were identified, providing insights into the challenges and support mechanisms that influence their academic outcomes. Additionally, the study examined the role of foster parents in shaping educational outcomes, highlighting their contributions, challenges, and areas where further support is needed. The role of social workers was also investigated, emphasizing their impact on the educational paths of foster youth and the ways in which their interventions can enhance academic success.

Several of the underlying assumptions were supported in this research, including the impact of unresolved pre-placement trauma on educational outcomes and the possibility that trauma experienced during foster placement affects academic achievement. Additionally, the study examined how the foster home and the school environment may contribute to or hinder educational success. The role of social workers was also explored, with a focus on how their personal attributes, workplace demands, and resource limitations influence the educational outcomes of foster youth. However, the assumption that foster youth who experience several placements may have poor educational outcomes than those in stable placements was not supported by this study results.

Below is a discussion of the major conclusions of the study, followed by recommendations for improving support systems to enhance the academic achievement of foster youth.

9.2.1 GETTING INTO CARE: ORPHANHOOD, ABANDONMENT, NEGLECT AND ABUSE

The findings reveal that orphanhood and abandonment are the predominant reasons for foster care placements. Extended family members, particularly grandmothers, often assumed caregiving responsibilities despite facing significant financial and

health challenges, echoing findings from Perumal (2011), Pretorius and Ross (2010) and Schiller (2015). The study also underscores the feminisation of caregiving roles, particularly among Black women, with a concerning trend of absent fathers further exacerbating the burden placed on women (Budlender & Lund, 2011; Hall & Richter, 2018; Seepamore, 2018). Beyond paternal absence, the findings reveal instances of both emotional and material abandonment by mothers, reflecting deeper societal challenges tied to gender inequality and systemic issues rooted in South Africa's historical context.

The findings further reveal that neglect contributes children entering foster care, supported by past findings (Dhludhlu, 2021; Moodley *et al.*, 2018; Morton, 2015a). Only in two instances was neglect accompanied by abuse in this study. Abuse and neglect are often tied to family dysfunction and parental substance abuse, which undermine the ability to care for children. Poverty exacerbates these challenges, restricting families' capacities to provide adequate care. Many biological parents struggle to meet their caregiving responsibilities due to extreme financial hardship, unemployment, and limited access to basic resources.

Despite South Africa's legislative framework for child protection, children continue to face significant hardships, pointing to the systemic gaps in the enforcement and delivery of child protection services. These challenges are closely linked to neoliberal policies that shift the burden of responsibility onto individuals and families while overlooking broader societal dysfunctions. The lack of government intervention and financial support for struggling families weakens efforts to keep families together, highlighting the need for a balanced approach that prioritizes the protection of children and ensures that poverty alone is not a reason for the removal of children. A Basic Income Grant (BIG) has been advocated for years as a means to support families with no source of income, potentially enhancing children's well-being and reducing the likelihood of their removal from their homes.

A further factor to consider is the reduced funding for NPOs which undermines their ability to deliver family-strengthening programmes and preventative and early intervention services, increasing the likelihood of children entering alternative care. The failure to address structural inequalities and provide sufficient resources for child

protection services contributes to a growing number of children requiring alternative care due to the inadequate support they receive within their families. Social workers play a vital role in carrying out risk assessments to determine whether a child requires care and protection. However, limited resources, high caseloads, and a lack of funding result in an emphasis on crisis intervention rather than preventative measures.

These findings show that foster care placement is shaped less by individual failings and more by poverty, gender inequality, and lack of family support. From a critical theory view, this reflects deep structural inequalities, while a capability perspective highlights how children and parents are denied the freedom to live meaningful lives. The emotional distress many youth carry into care—and the ongoing struggles when parental relationships remain unresolved—underscores the need for preventative, family-centred strategies that build capabilities, address structural injustices, and protect children’s best interests within their families and communities.

9.2.2 THE POWER OF SOCIAL SUPPORT

9.2.2.1 Foster parents

The majority of foster youth, including those who advanced to tertiary education and those who dropped out of school, reported having close and supportive relationships with their foster parents. Foster parents offered emotional support and comfort and played the role of a “mother” for many foster children. This helped the foster youth to feel like they belonged in the foster home and face challenges they had encountered.

These findings align with prior research by Mampane and Ross (2017) and Perumal (2011) who found that foster parents and foster children shared a close relationship. Only a minority of post-secondary students and school leavers felt unsupported or misunderstood by their foster parents, highlighting disparities in the perceived quality of care.

Foster parents demonstrated varying levels of involvement in the academic lives of foster youth. Many were proactive, attending school meetings, motivating the youth, and celebrating their achievements. However, older foster parents and those with limited education often struggled to meet the academic needs of foster youth,

especially as the children advanced in school. Nonetheless, foster parents who faced these limitations sought alternative resources, such as involving community members or extended family, to support the foster youth's education. Financial constraints also hindered some foster parents from fully supporting the academic aspirations of their foster youth.

The challenges faced by foster parents indicate the need for systemic interventions, including access to community resources, financial assistance, and educational programmes to support foster families. Despite these obstacles, many foster parents played a vital role in enhancing the capabilities of foster youth by providing emotional support, stability, and motivation. This reflects the core principle of the capability approach, which emphasizes creating environments that enable individuals to achieve their desired outcomes (Sen, 1993).

This study reveals the crucial contributions of foster parents in promoting the educational success of youth, while also pointing to areas where additional resources and support are necessary to address gaps in care and communication.

9.2.2.2. Peers and Friends

The study revealed that peers played a crucial role for foster youth who advanced to tertiary education. They benefited from supportive friendships that encouraged academic excellence, provided practical assistance with school projects, and offered emotional support. Such supportive peer relationships likely contributed to a sense of belonging beyond the foster home, underscoring the potential of positive peer influence on foster youth.

In contrast, youth who left school, cited negative peer influence, such as substance abuse, peer pressure to fit in and disrespectful behaviours. The negative behaviour as a result of peer influence extended to the school environment, leading to truancy and substance abuse. This may have contributed to school leavers being uninterested in their academic work and contributing to their decision to leave school.

This study highlights the dual impact of friendships on foster youth, while positive friendships provide support and encouragement for those pursuing post-secondary

education, negative friendships contribute to substance abuse, rule-breaking behaviours, and truancy among school dropouts. It is crucial to support foster youth in building healthy peer relationships, as these connections can be invaluable to their personal and academic success.

9.2.2.3 Educators

The majority of foster youth who progressed to tertiary education had positive relationships with their educators. These educators provided both emotional and practical support, helping the youth feel valued, encouraged, and understood. Such relationships were important in creating a nurturing and supportive environment, fostering a sense of belonging and stability that enhanced their capabilities and academic success (Sen, 1993; Walker & Unterhalter, 2007). This study underscores the important role that educators play in promoting the educational success of foster youth.

In contrast, most school leavers described their educators as distant and unsupportive. This lack of connection negatively affected their self-esteem and academic performance. Factors such as labelling, low motivation, and educators' limited expectations further contributed to feelings of inadequacy among foster youth.

The findings underscore that educators have a crucial role in supporting foster youth to achieve educational success and highlights the importance of equipping them with the skills and resources needed to meet the unique needs of foster youth within the school environment.

Overall, the findings show that the education of foster youth is strongly shaped by the support they receive from families, peers, and schools. Foster parents give a sense of belonging and stability, peers can either help or harm through their influence, and teachers can strengthen or weaken motivation and aspirations. When these supports work together, foster youth are more likely to build resilience and succeed in school. But when support is weak or missing, their challenges grow, and the risk of dropping out increases. This highlights the need for a collaborative approach that strengthens support from families, peers, and schools at the same time, since lasting success depends on all of these working together.

9.2.3 RESILIENCE, MOTIVATION AND ASPIRATIONS

Foster youth demonstrated remarkable resilience, despite facing challenges, such as trauma, abandonment, and loss. Many of those who pursued tertiary education or opted for different paths, such as technical skills development, displayed their strengths and a determination to overcome adversity and strive towards personal and educational goals. Their efforts reflect an important aspect of the capability approach, which emphasizes not only access to opportunities but also the ability to convert these opportunities into meaningful achievements, enabling individuals to lead lives they have reason to value (Sen, 1993).

Van Breda (2018) contends that resilience is not solely an individual trait but is located within networks of social relationships, including family, friends, schools, and communities, with some resilience processes shown to be more relational than intrapsychic. In the South African context, Van Breda highlights that this relational approach to resilience aligns with the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*, which underscores the centrality of social connections to individual well-being.

Expanding on this perspective, Van Breda situates resilience within the person-in-environment framework, emphasizing the importance of fostering positive relationships, particularly with families and teachers. He notes the need for these stakeholders to understand the challenges faced by individuals and to actively engage with them. Families, communities, and the broader social environment serve as sources of resilience (Van Breda, 2017). Supportive relationships are fundamental to fostering resilience among children. Van Breda (2024a) introduces a "triangle of support" that underpins sustained resilient outcomes for young people. This model includes three interrelated components: the relational capacity of the young person, the support provided by others, and the role of formal social services.

The educational aspirations of foster youth varied in this study. Those who advanced to tertiary education exhibited agency and determination, striving to create better futures for themselves. This reflects a key principle of the capability approach, which underscores the importance of freedom to choose and act in line with one's desired outcomes (Sen, 1993). These young individuals aspired to independence, driven by

goals of financial stability, secure employment, and personal success, highlighting their understanding that education can empower them to achieve their ambitions

In contrast, foster youth who dropped out of school often displayed lower levels of motivation and aspirations. Feelings of shame, inadequacy, and ridicule from peers had a demotivating effect, which, as Sen (1993) suggests, can constrain their capabilities and freedom to pursue education and personal development. However, Galliot and Graham (2014) argue that the inability of some youth to envision future aspirations should not be viewed solely as an individual issue. Instead, the nature and quality of education play a crucial role in shaping both achievements and setbacks.

While resilience emphasizes an individual's ability to thrive despite adversity, other factors contribute to sustained resilience in vulnerable children such as the quality of relationships they share. Simultaneously, it is important to recognize the structural inequalities that exacerbate their challenges, such as widespread poverty and the fragmented state of the education system. Compounding these issues is an overburdened FCS, which often struggles to provide comprehensive support to foster youth, including building their resilience. Neoliberal policies complicate this by distancing social workers from building meaningful, supportive relationships with the children in their care. To fully harness the resilience of foster youth, systemic change is essential, this means tackling structural barriers, challenging inequalities, and creating opportunities for foster youth to actively participate in decisions about their care, ensuring their perspectives are heard and their needs are met.

9.2.4 EXTRA-CURRICULAR INVOLVEMENT

The study found that foster youth who progressed to tertiary education were more engaged in extracurricular activities, which appeared to correlate with positive educational outcomes. Participation in these activities provided opportunities to develop leadership and social skills, fostered positive self-esteem, and enhanced their sense of belonging within their school communities. Conversely, most school leavers had limited involvement in extracurricular activities, which curtailed their chances to build meaningful friendships and develop essential life skills.

A significant number of school leavers attended quintile 2 and 3 schools, which typically offer fewer extracurricular options due to resource constraints. However, it is noteworthy that some foster youth who progressed to tertiary education also attended these resource-limited schools but made a deliberate choice to engage in the activities available to them.

The findings show that extracurricular activities can build resilience and support foster youths' success, but unequal access means not all benefit equally. Lower-resourced schools often limit these opportunities. This contrast highlights the importance of extracurricular engagement in fostering resilience and supporting educational success, even in under-resourced environments. While structural inequalities such as limited resources in lower-quintile schools present barriers, the agency and choices of individual youth to engage with opportunities can positively influence their paths (Alkire & Deneulin, 2009). To address these gaps, we must recognise foster youth as active participants in their growth while also tackling the wider inequalities in school resources so all young people have a fair chance to develop outside the classroom.

9.2.5 A FAILING EDUCATION SYSTEM

Foster youth who progressed to tertiary education attended schools across both fee-paying schools in quintiles 4 and 5 as well as non-fee-paying schools in quintiles 2 and 3. This suggests that the quintile classification of schools alone may not fully determine progression to higher education. Notably, a number of foster youth from low-income backgrounds attended higher quintile schools. This may be attributed to school fee exemptions facilitated by social workers, indicating the importance of financial support measures in improving access to quality education.

The study found that most school leavers were enrolled in non-fee-paying quintile 2 and 3 schools, which are often under-resourced and associated with lower academic performance and higher dropout rates (Havemann, 2024; Weybright *et al.*, 2017). However, some foster youth who dropped out had attended fee-paying and independent faith-based schools, suggesting that socio-economic disadvantages and thwarted aspirations can contribute to dropout even in better-resourced educational settings.

These findings underscore the systemic inequalities within the South African education system for vulnerable youth. Quintile 4 and 5 schools, which are generally better resourced, tend to provide higher-quality education and yield better educational outcomes. In contrast, quintile 2 and 3 schools often lack adequate resources and infrastructure, limiting educational progress and increasing the likelihood of dropout. Attendance at well-resourced quintile 4 and 5 schools provides a more supportive learning environment, which positively impacts educational outcomes. This is reflective of the capability approach, which emphasizes the importance of enabling environments that foster the development of capabilities essential for academic success (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007).

The study recruited participants from two groups of foster youth, 52 individuals who had successfully progressed to tertiary education and 78 who had dropped out of school before completing their education. Notably, the number of school leavers exceeded those who advanced to tertiary education. This trend reflects the broader dropout crisis in South Africa. Research by Hartnack (2017), Soudien (2013), Spaul (2015) and Weybright *et al.* (2017) underscores the high dropout rates prevalent across the country. Havemann (2024) further highlights the severity of the issue, stating that out of 100 children, only 60% will sit for the matriculation examination, and that out of this only 37 will pass.

9.2.5.1 SPECIAL LEARNING NEEDS, GRADE REPETITION AND PROGRESSING YOUTH INTO A HIGHER GRADE

All the school leavers struggled with educational challenges, with some experiencing early academic challenges often with literacy and numeracy that escalated in secondary schools. The fact that the primary school difficulties were unaddressed reveals systemic neglect, impacting the foster youth's academic progression. Some foster youth also had special learning needs that were not identified or identified late by their social workers and educators, resulting in these youth not having access to appropriate resources such as special schooling.

The study found that all the foster youth who dropped out of school had previously failed at least one term or multiple grades during their primary or secondary education.

Many of these youth progressed to the next grade despite not meeting the required academic standards, in line with the DOE's promotional criteria outlined in its 2019 circular (Department of Basic Education, 2019). While intended to facilitate progression, these policies inadvertently set foster youth up for failure by advancing them without ensuring they acquire essential reading and writing skills. This practice left foster youth academically underprepared and also negatively affected their self-esteem. They struggled to keep up with their peers and often felt uncomfortable and embarrassed.

The findings highlight an urgent need for systemic reform to address early learning deficits, ensure timely identification of special learning needs, and strengthen collaboration between schools and child protection services. At present, gaps in coordination mean that many foster youth who struggle academically or have additional learning needs are not identified or supported, allowing them to slip through the cracks. Without such structural interventions, foster youth remain at heightened risk of educational exclusion, perpetuating cycles of poverty and marginalisation. A holistic, coordinated approach is therefore essential, one that identifies barriers early and provides targeted academic and psychosocial support to promote equitable opportunities for all foster youth.

9.2.6 KIN VS NON-KIN PLACEMENTS

The study found that many school leavers and post-secondary students were placed with extended family members, indicating the reliance on kinship care in South Africa, as documented by previous research (Foster, 2004; Freeman & Nkomo, 2006; Pretorius & Ross, 2010). The data indicate that many foster youth experienced stable placements suggesting that both kinship and non-kinship care placements can provide the stability essential for supporting positive outcomes for foster youth. Viewed through the lens of Sen's (1993) capability approach, this stability can create an supportive environment that enhances the capabilities of foster youth to pursue the lives they attach meaning to.

However, an unexpected finding was the prevalence of multiple placements and school dropouts among youth in kinship care. This challenges the perception of kinship care as more stable and points to unique issues such as inadequate caregiver

screening, overburdened caregivers, and a lack of training and resources. These factors may compromise the ability of kinship caregivers to address the needs of foster youth effectively.

South African legislation and international charters prioritize placing children who require alternative care with their biological families, as it is widely believed that such placements are less disruptive due to existing family bonds. In practice, social workers, often advocate for family-based placements as a way to keep children within their own family units. Recent legislation, such as the Children's Amendment Act, emphasizes this approach by placing the responsibility for children in the event of their parents' death on extended family members.

While the South African government has introduced measures like the Child Support Grant (CSG) top-up to assist caregivers, structural challenges such as poverty and unemployment, affecting Black South African families, are often overlooked. These systemic issues, combined with the cultural expectation rooted in Ubuntu that "no child is an orphan," place a huge caregiving burden on women. According to African values, care of children are viewed as a shared responsibility, with any family or community member expected to step in as needed (Ntshongwana & Tanga, 2018; Radebe & Phooko, 2017; Whitworth & Wilkinson, 2013). This cultural norm means that kinship foster parents often do not have a choice in assuming caregiving responsibilities.

In contrast, non-relative foster parents typically make an intentional decision to foster children. Motivated by personal experiences or the desire to help children these foster parents undergo screening and training to prepare for the role and are offered more support (Emovan *et al.*, 2019; Ntshongwana & Tanga, 2018). Since it is often assumed that kinship placements are more nurturing and stable, these caregivers may be perceived as needing less support and training, which can create gaps in service provision. These assumptions are often unrealistic. Kinship foster parents face numerous challenges, including financial strain, emotional stress, and difficulties managing behavioural issues in foster children. These issues, such as disrespect or other behavioural challenges, can lead to caregivers struggling to cope with their responsibilities, sometimes resulting in placement breakdowns (Hearle & Ruwanpura, 2009; Ntshongwana & Tanga, 2018). Moreover, kinship foster parents may experience thwarted expectations when the reality of caregiving for kin does not fit with their

expectations, indicating the need for open communication, and greater support and resources to ensure the success of these placements.

The study's finding that kinship care is linked to multiple placements contrasts with international research, which often associates it with greater stability. This discrepancy may reflect the unique socioeconomic and family-related challenges faced by kinship caregivers in South Africa, including poverty, inadequate support, and unrecognised burdens. Given the policy emphasis on kinship care in the country, this difference has important implications for both policy and practice and warrants further research. While kinship care remains culturally valued, it is not inherently more stable, and strengthening it requires revised policy that provides training, resources, and psychosocial support to address both its potential and its vulnerabilities within South Africa's distinctive social context.

9.2.7 INSTRUMENTALISATION OF THE ROLE OF THE SOCIAL WORKER

This study found that foster youth had infrequent and inconsistent contact with their social workers, as communication was primarily directed toward foster parents. By relying on foster parents for communication and decision-making, power imbalances were reinforced disempowering foster youth. Most foster youth expressed having no specific expectations of their social workers but desired more personal interaction and engagement with them.

The findings further reveal that many foster youth endured severe trauma, which impacted their emotional well-being. Despite social workers' awareness of the adverse childhood experiences faced by foster youth, there was little evidence of therapeutic interventions aimed at addressing trauma, which reduced their opportunities for healing and recovery. They focused mostly on ensuring the safety of the foster children and meeting the legal requirements of foster care, often overlooking the emotional needs of the youth.

The study also revealed that several foster youth experienced physical and emotional abuse within their foster homes. A concern was that the abuse disclosed by foster youth during interviews was neither documented in their case files nor reported by foster parents. This underreporting highlights a gap in communication between social

workers and foster youth. Social workers acknowledged the prevalence of abuse but lacked the capacity due to high caseloads to provide adequate support, as systemic barriers hindered their ability to address the emotional and psychological needs of foster youth. Overburdened social workers provided limited reunification services to children and their biological parents, which strained the relationships between foster youth and their biological families. Foster youth, therefore were often left to navigate the emotional challenges associated with their biological parents on their own.

Social workers prioritized administrative duties such as reviewing placements, compiling statistics, and meeting audit requirements over addressing the emotional, psychological, and developmental needs of foster youth. Social workers' heavy focus on administrative tasks left limited time to build trust and establish therapeutic relationships with the youth. This bureaucratic focus reflects systemic inefficiencies caused by high caseloads, limited resources, insufficient time, inadequate funding, and the influence of neoliberal policies. While social workers monitored the academic progress of foster youth through school reports, this had minimal impact on educational outcomes indicating a lack of meaningful academic support and guidance for foster youth.

This study revealed the instrumentalization of social workers' roles within the FCS, where bureaucratic and administrative priorities overshadow the provision of essential emotional and therapeutic support for foster youth. Social workers felt they had no choice but to fulfil their statutory, mandatory responsibilities. While it cannot be denied that social workers face challenges such as high caseloads, fulfilling administrative requirements, lack of resources and funding, social workers have not challenged neoliberal and NPM influences. There is thus an urgent need for social workers to critically examine how systemic pressures impact their services to foster youth and prevent them from forming trusting and therapeutic relationships and advocate to reclaim their professional status as social workers.

The CRC and the ACWRC mandates that children's voices to be heard. Section 10 of the Children's Act was designed align South African legislation with international instruments and advocates for children to participate in decisions affecting their care. In this study, some foster youth were unaware of their foster care status, indicating a

gap in communication between foster parents, social workers, and the foster youth where foster youth were not consulted regarding their placement. Social workers communicated more with foster parents. This marginalized the voices of foster youth, limiting their access to direct support and excluding them from meaningful involvement in decisions about their care.

Despite this, it must be noted that some social workers demonstrated a commitment to foster youth by building meaningful relationships, showing compassion and care and rendering therapeutic services. However, these efforts were not explicitly reflected in case records and this sample. Insights from the focus groups with the social workers, as well as my own experience in the child protection field have revealed the dedication of some social workers, who despite high caseloads, limited resources and bureaucratic demands are able to support foster youth and their families. Their personal attributes enable them to support foster youth, in spite of the challenges they face.

The findings highlight systemic gaps in foster care social work, including limited youth engagement, excessive administrative focus, and inadequate trauma support, all compounded by resource constraints and policy pressures. Strengthening practice requires restoring the therapeutic and relational core of social work, ensuring foster youth have a central voice, and addressing structural barriers through adequate resources, training, and advocacy.

In summary, the findings show that positive outcomes for foster youth depend on both strong relationships and supportive structures. When environments offer guidance, resources, and opportunities, foster youth can build resilience, motivation, and aspiration. But systemic neglect, under-resourced schools, unaddressed trauma, and the marginalisation of foster youth limit their freedoms and opportunities. These issues reflect deeper structural inequalities and policy shortcomings, showing the need for holistic interventions that strengthen caregivers, schools, social workers, and communities so foster youth can thrive in all areas of life.

9.3 RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the major conclusions derived from this study, recommendations are made in relation to the need to address systemic inequalities and poverty; a call for a re-evaluation of the quintile system; implementation of early screening and intervention for children with learning disabilities; redefining the relationship between the DSD and NPOs and challenging neoliberalism and NPM; improved screening and support of kinship carers; enhanced psychosocial and educational support for foster youth; greater support for foster families; and a re-claiming of the social work profession.

9.3.1 ADDRESSING SYSTEMIC INEQUALITIES AND POVERTY

Poverty is a significant contributor to child neglect and abandonment, highlighting the urgent need for systemic reforms to address the root causes of family dysfunction. The government must shift the responsibility of addressing poverty, unemployment, and economic oppression away from individuals and families and instead prioritize structural reforms that tackle these systemic issues. This will ensure a shift from neoliberal policies that force individuals, families and communities to take responsibility for their own well-being. While the child support grant introduced by the government provides some relief, many children continue to live in poverty, leaving them vulnerable and at risk. The Social Relief of Distress Grant that was introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic has also benefitted many families, but families continue to suffer the consequences of poverty. Therefore, the Basic Income Grant, which has been under discussion for several years, requires more focused attention from the government, to strengthen families to care for their children.

Policies must extend beyond cash transfers to encompass holistic, family and community-based preventative interventions. These should focus on poverty alleviation, job creation, and expanded social welfare services to support families more effectively. A stronger emphasis on prevention and early intervention services is essential. This includes offering parents comprehensive support and implementing targeted substance abuse programmes for at-risk families. Such interventions aim to stabilize families and address underlying issues before situations deteriorate to the point where the removal of children becomes necessary.

By tackling poverty and providing proactive support, systemic reforms can promote family stability, safeguard children, and reduce the incidence of neglect and abandonment.

9.3.2 RE-EVALUATE THE QUINTILE SYSTEM

The quintile system requires urgent re-evaluation, as it currently fails to adequately address the needs of many schools with high poverty rates. A revised approach should ensure that the allocation of funds and resources is driven by the specific needs of students rather than solely by the geographic location of the school.

To address disparities, funding and resource allocation for lower-quintile schools should be increased. This would improve the quality of education in schools, reduce dropout rates and improve academic achievement. Enhanced funding should also enable schools to provide robust extracurricular programmes for all students, including foster youth. Participation in such activities fosters the development of essential life skills, resilience, leadership, and self-confidence, which are critical for positive youth development.

9.3.3 IMPLEMENT EARLY SCREENING AND INTERVENTION PROGRAMMES FOR STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

Given the educational challenges that many school leavers face, schools should establish early screening and tracking of learning challenges that youth experience. These youth should thereafter participate in programmes that are appropriate to meet their unique educational needs. Linked to this is the need for DOE to strengthen its educational support units that can support learners with special needs.

School-based social workers can provide emotional and social support for foster youth. This would enable a quicker response to behavioural and academic challenges, ensuring that the foster youth receives the help that they need without delays. On-site social workers should provide training for educators on supporting youth who have experienced trauma, fostering cultural sensitivity, and managing behavioural challenges. This training will equip educators with a deeper understanding of foster youth and enhance their ability to provide effective support.

9.3.4 RECOGNISING THE “PARTNERSHIP” WITH THE DCPOs/NGOs AND REVISITING NEOLIBERALISM

The White Paper for Social Welfare acknowledges the critical role of the NGO sector, and DCPOs, in delivering services to children and families. While efforts were made to strengthen the partnership between the government and NGOs, this recognition has not been accompanied by a firm commitment to sustainable support.

Additionally, the adoption of neoliberal policies has shaped the relationship between NGOs and the state, with the state pushing NGOs to operate more like businesses while reducing their reliance on government support.. This has led to NGOs facing financial insecurity, forcing them to compete for limited funding, and aligning their services with donor expectations rather than community needs.

Recent funding cuts by the DSD to NGOs, including DCPOs, highlight the government's insufficient dedication to protecting children and supporting families. These reductions disproportionately impact prevention and early intervention programmes. Without robust prevention and early intervention initiatives, the demand for statutory services will inevitably continue to rise.

The government must revisit and revise the Financing Policy for the NGO sector to ensure full, equitable funding for services, rather than subsidising services and forcing NGOs to function as businesses. Adequate funding would enhance service delivery while also improving the morale of social workers in the NGO sector, who currently earn significantly less than their counterparts in government departments despite performing the same duties. A renewed commitment to supporting the NGO sector is vital to achieving sustainable and effective child protection outcomes. The government should establish an equitable partnership with the NGOs, ensuring that they complement and not replace government services. The government should move away from expecting NGOs to function as businesses and tender and compete for delivering of social services, but provide core funding to them to render essential services to families.

Social worker caseloads must be reduced to enable them to focus on providing direct emotional and therapeutic support to foster youth, through the employment of additional social workers and streamlining administrative processes. With lighter

caseloads, social workers can maintain more regular and consistent contact with foster youth, fostering trusting therapeutic relationships that encourage open communication about their concerns. Reduced caseloads would also allow for more frequent home visits, increasing visibility and accessibility to both foster parents and foster youth. This proactive approach ensures that issues such as overburdened household responsibilities, poor treatment within the foster home, and instances of abuse are identified and addressed promptly.

9.3.5 IMPROVED SCREENING, TRAINING AND SUPPORT FOR KINSHIP FOSTER PARENTS

It is often assumed that kinship carers require less support and training than non-relative foster carers. However, findings from this study reveal that kinship carers face significant challenges, with placement breakdowns in this study predominantly occurring in kinship care settings.

To address these issues, more rigorous screening and training for kinship carers are essential to ensure they are prepared to manage the behavioural challenges and emotional needs of foster children. Social workers should follow the procedures outlined in the *Guidelines for the Effective Management of Foster Care* and the *Children's Act* to screen and train kinship foster parents, ensuring the same rigorous process is applied as with non-kinship foster parents. Additionally, targeted interventions should be implemented to support kinship carers, many of whom are elderly and grappling with poverty and other difficulties. This will strengthen the stability and success of kinship care placements.

9.3.6 ENHANCED SUPPORT FOR FOSTER YOUTH

Foster youth should have access to services that prioritize their emotional well-being and help them navigate the challenges of foster care. This should include:

- ✓ **Counselling on grief and trauma** – Counselling should begin prior to placement to help foster youth process feelings of grief, abandonment, and trauma. Ongoing emotional and psychological support is essential to help them cope with being in foster care and foster stability in their placements.

- ✓ **Comprehensive therapeutic support** – Therapy should not only address immediate behavioural issues but also tackle the root causes of emotional and psychological distress stemming from early trauma and loss. Counselling should focus on grief, attachment issues, and identity challenges, which can reduce behavioural challenges and strengthen placement stability.
- ✓ **Building positive relationships** – Counselling, either individually or in groups, should include strategies to assist foster youth develop healthy relationships with their foster parents. Stronger bonds can minimize the risk of placement disruptions, provide a foundation of stability and trust, and enhance educational outcomes.
- ✓ **Mentorship and peer support programmes** – Social workers should establish mentorship programmes that connect foster youth with successful foster care alumni. These mentors can be positive role models, provide guidance, and help foster youth feel less isolated. Such programmes can also encourage academic persistence and reduce engagement in risky behaviours. Additionally, peer support programmes should be established to encourage positive friendships, academic collaboration and emotional support.
- ✓ **Group work programmes with foster youth** – Group work programmes should be designed to equip foster youth with essential life skills, including decision-making, problem-solving, and coping strategies. These programmes should also focus on building resilience, fostering positive friendships, and encouraging responsible decision-making.
- ✓ **Voices of foster youth to be heard** – Foster youth should be involved in decisions about their care, ensuring they feel heard, respected, and valued. Greater participation in decision-making empowers foster youth and strengthens their sense of agency and belonging.

By addressing both the immediate and long-term needs of foster youth, these initiatives can enhance their emotional well-being and provide them with the skills to thrive in foster care and beyond.

9.3.7 ACADEMIC SUPPORT FOR FOSTER YOUTH

- ✓ **Career counselling and vocational training** – Recognizing that some foster youth face challenges in formal education, social workers should prioritize

career counselling that aligns with their interests and strengths. This should include access to vocational training and practical strategies for seeking employment, equipping foster youth with the tools needed to build sustainable futures.

- ✓ **Collaboration with educators and foster parents** – Social workers must establish strong, collaborative relationships with educators and foster parents to provide holistic support for foster youth. Timely interventions can be implemented for those struggling academically when communication channels are improved. Educators who understand the unique circumstances of foster youth are better positioned to offer appropriate support.
- ✓ **Community-based educational programmes** – Social workers should implement *Ubuntu*-based interventions that bring together schools, foster families, and community organizations to create comprehensive educational support networks. These initiatives should include after-school programmes offering tutoring and mentoring, ensuring that foster youth receive the academic assistance they need. Such programmes can address gaps in foster parents' educational capabilities and ensure equitable access to resources for all foster youth.

By fostering collaboration, promoting community involvement, and tailoring support to the unique needs of foster youth, social workers can help create pathways to academic success and brighter futures.

9.3.8 ENHANCED SUPPORT FOR FOSTER PARENTS

Strengthening support systems for foster parents is essential to improve the well-being and outcomes of foster youth. Foster parents require consistent financial, emotional, and practical assistance, together with ongoing training to effectively fulfil their roles.

The training should focus on:

- ✓ **Effective communication and fostering belonging** – Foster parents should be trained to communicate openly and sensitively with foster youth about their placements. The training should emphasize fostering a sense of belonging by treating foster youth as equal and valued members of the family. Foster parents

should be equipped with active listening skills that are crucial for building trust and strong relationships.

- ✓ **Supporting reunification** – Foster parents need guidance on supporting the reunification process and understanding the complexities foster youth face in maintaining relationships with both their biological and foster families.
- ✓ **Adolescent development and behaviour management** – Training programmes should focus on adolescent development, and helping foster parents understand and address challenging behaviours.
- ✓ **Trauma-informed care** – Foster parents should receive training on trauma, grief, and loss to better understand the emotional needs of foster youth. Such training can help them recognise how trauma contributes to behavioural challenges and equip them with practical strategies to support children's emotional healing. In addition, trauma-informed care can assist foster parents in addressing their own past or secondary trauma, which not only promotes their well-being but also strengthens their ability to provide safe and nurturing care.
- ✓ **Positive discipline methods** – Foster parents should be trained on positive discipline techniques that is essential to help them manage behaviours effectively.
- ✓ **Educational support** – Workshops with foster parents should focus on educational planning and career guidance that will assist them to support foster youth in making informed academic and career decisions.
- ✓ **Group work programmes with foster parents** – These programmes can offer foster parents a supportive platform to connect with others in similar situations, fostering mutual learning and reducing feelings of isolation. Additionally, they provide an opportunity for foster parents to express and process their own grief related to personal losses.

By enhancing support systems and equipping foster parents with the necessary knowledge and skills, they can create more stable, nurturing environments that foster the emotional, social, and academic success of foster youth.

9.3.9 RECLAIMING THE SOCIAL WORK PROFESSION

Social workers must reclaim their developmental and therapeutic role by prioritizing the emotional, psychological, and developmental needs of foster youth. Achieving this requires advocating for increased funding and resources to help balance administrative responsibilities with direct service delivery. Social workers should critically reflect on their professional roles and unite to challenge systemic structures that emphasize bureaucratic tasks over therapeutic and developmental support. This includes challenging neoliberal policies and NPM practices that focus on cost-efficiency and cost-effectiveness procedures over core social work values.

Professional organizations and policymakers must collaborate to redefine the social workers' roles, enabling them to focus on social change, development, and the empowerment of individuals. Social workers must be empowered to push for the integrity of their profession, demand the respect it deserves, and resist complacency in accepting bureaucracy that undermines their essential purpose.

9.3.10 RECOMMENDED TRAINING FOR SOCIAL WORKERS

Social workers should participate in ongoing training that encompasses a range of critical topics, including:

- ✓ Social workers should be trained on child participation and including the voices of children in all aspects of their work.
- ✓ Social workers should receive training on effectively communicating with foster youth about their placements. This should include the importance of early disclosure and the use of compassionate, sensitive language when discussing information about their biological parents.
- ✓ Social workers should be trained in providing family reunification services and facilitating structured contact between biological parents and their children.
- ✓ Specialised training on trauma-informed interventions and healing the inner child.
- ✓ Advocacy skills so as to challenge the pervasive, negative neoliberal and NPM impacts on children and families and on the social work profession.

9.3.11 RECOMMENDED FUTURE RESEARCH

- ✓ A larger scale study similar to this one, focusing on foster youth, foster parents, and social workers, but also incorporating the perspectives and experiences of educators in supporting foster youth to achieve positive educational outcomes.
- ✓ A pilot research programme should be introduced for foster youth, offering educational support through mentoring and tutoring from Grade 10 to Grade 12. The implementation process should be documented to evaluate its effectiveness and provide insights for the development of future initiatives.
- ✓ Considering the discrepancies between this study and international findings on the benefits of kinship care, further research is necessary to investigate the specific factors contributing to instability in kinship care placements within South Africa. Such research will provide critical insights to guide and improve future policies and practices.
- ✓ Although school mobility did not emerge as a significant issue in this study, further research on foster youth and school mobility in South Africa is essential. Such research will enhance understanding of the impact of school mobility on the educational outcomes of foster youth and provide valuable insights to inform policies aimed at supporting their educational success.
- ✓ A national study incorporating quantitative and qualitative research into the social workers' working conditions and their impact on their engagements with communities, families and individuals.

9.3.12 CONCLUSION

Despite South Africa's legislative framework for child protection, many families continue to grapple with the enduring consequences of the Apartheid-era policies, leaving them unable to meet their responsibilities toward their children. Neoliberal policies and NPM approaches have exacerbated these challenges by placing the burden of change on families without addressing the broader structural factors that contribute to their struggles, increasing the vulnerabilities of families and children. As a result, alternative care, particularly foster care has become a key child protection strategy.

This study contributes further knowledge by highlighting the complex interplay of individual, relational, and systemic factors that shape foster youths' educational outcomes. It demonstrates that positive relationships with caregivers, peers, and teachers, combined with stable school environments and access to support services, enhance youths' capability to achieve valued educational goals. Conversely, structural constraints, negative peer influences, and inconsistent caregiving can hinder success. By situating these findings within the South African context, the study underscores how historical inequities and institutional limitations impact foster youth education. Importantly, it provides evidence-based insights for policy and practice, identifying specific interventions, such as mentorship programs, academic monitoring by foster parents, and school-based support, that can foster educational resilience and success.

The study also reveals the emotional realities of foster youth, including experiences of trauma, stigma, and a sense of not belonging, alongside the typical developmental challenges of adolescence. These difficulties impact their long-term development, particularly their educational outcomes. Although education remains a critical pathway to gaining employment and independence, foster youth often face unique barriers that shape their educational journeys. Despite these obstacles, many foster youth in this study demonstrated remarkable resilience, striving to pursue higher education and overcome their circumstances. Their aspirations and motivation, accompanied by supportive relationships with foster parents, educators, and peers facilitated their academic success.

However, persistent inequalities in the post-apartheid education system remain evident. The high dropout rates among foster youth attending Quintile 1-3 schools underscore the urgent need for interventions that ensure equitable access to improved education for all South African children. Addressing these systemic challenges is essential to improving the educational outcomes of foster youth, thus enabling them to become contributing members of Society. Additionally, the government must reprioritize the family as an important support system for children. Strengthening families by providing adequate resources and support will enable them to fulfill their responsibilities and reduce the need for alternative care placements.

Social workers play a vital role in supporting foster youth, but their role must shift from a primarily bureaucratic function toward a holistic, developmental, and therapeutic

approach grounded in the core values of social work. Education must be central to foster care planning, supported by case management systems that monitor progress, address barriers early, and ensure continuity of care.

Ultimately, this study shows that education is a key pathway to independence for foster youth, but systemic weaknesses, such as high caseloads, poor coordination, and inconsistent policy, undermine their potential. Strengthening case management, improving inter-sectoral collaboration, expanding support services such as tutoring, counselling, and mentorship, and addressing structural inequalities are essential. A restructured, well-resourced welfare system that integrates education into its core mandate offers the most viable path toward enabling foster youth to achieve their full academic, social, and emotional potential.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1

REQUEST FOR PERMISSION FROM GATEKEEPERS

P.O. Box 748
Pietermaritzburg
3200
24 May 2021

For attention:

The Director

Dear Sir/Madam

REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH AT YOUR ORGANIZATION

I have been accepted into a Doctor of Philosophy Degree in Social Work, in the School of Applied Human Sciences at the University of KwaZulu Natal. My supervisors are Prof V. Sewpaul and Dr B. Seepamore (proof of registration is attached).

To meet the requirements of the degree I am intending to conduct research with foster children, their foster parents and their social workers. The proposed title of the project is "Factors affecting educational outcomes of foster children: A comparative collective case study design".

I hereby request permission to include your organization, clients and staff in the research study. This will include having access to your case files, clients and staff who meet the following criteria:

1. FOSTER CHILDREN WHO DROPPED OUT OF SCHOOL AND DID NOT COMPLETE MATRIC

- youth 18 years and over
- youth who dropped out of school in the last three years and did not complete matric
- must have been in foster care

2. FOSTER CHILDREN WHO ARE ATTENDING TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS

- youth 18 years and over
- attending tertiary institutions
- must have been in foster care

3. SOCIAL WORKERS

- Social workers who have more than 2 years of experience in foster care services and have supervised the foster children who have been selected for the study.

4. FOSTER PARENTS

- Foster parents of the foster children who have been selected above.

Your written permission is required for the purposes of submitting the proposal to the College of Humanities and the Ethics Committee of the University of KwaZulu Natal.

Kindly note that I am not requesting access to the case files or have contact with the participants, until the Ethics Committee has approved the study. The approval will be made available to you once it has been received. Kindly note as well, that this study will be at no cost to your organization and the research report will be made available to you, once it is completed.

It would be appreciated if written approval is granted by 10 June 2021.

Kindly contact me if you have any queries.

Thank you

Yours faithfully

JOTHIE PERUMAL

██████████

APPENDIX 2- PERMISSION FROM G ATEKEEPERS



BY HAND

25 May 2021

Ms Jothie Perumal

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH AT 

Your letter dated 24 May 2021 has reference.

In principle your request to conduct research at the organization is approved subject to the following :

- Written approval of the proposed study received from the University Ethics Committee
- Compliance with the provisions of POPI Act
- Participants selected for the research project are properly informed of the purpose of the research and the use of any data collated and expressly agree - in writing - to participate

Yours sincerely





23 May 2021

Ms Jothie Perumal

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH AT 

Your letter dated 24 May 2021 has reference.

In principle your request to conduct research at the organization is approved subject to the following:

- Written approval of the proposed study received from the University Ethics Committee
- Compliance with the provisions of POPI Act
- Participants selected for the research project are properly informed of the purpose of the research and the use of any data collated and expressly agree - in writing - to participate

Yours sincerely



01 June 2021

Dear Jothie Perumal

This is to confirm that [REDACTED] willing to assist in the planned research for your Doctor of Philosophy Degree in Social Work as outlined in your request to this effect dated 24 May 2021.

In this regard [REDACTED] is willing to:

- 1) Identify children and youth who may qualify for inclusion in your study
- 2) If, selected for possible inclusion, provide you with the contact details that we have for them and those of their Foster Parent(s) for briefing & consent purposes
- 3) Provide you access to their case files, should they and their Foster Parent(s) consent to participate in the study and to us providing you with such access
- 4) Provide you with the contact details of the Social Worker(s) who dealt with these cases for the purposes of briefing & consent should these Social Workers still be on our staff
- 5) Provide you with reasonable access to these Social Workers during office hours, should they consent to be part of the study.

The above is conditional upon the proposed study receiving full ethical clearance and us receiving certified copies of the written consent provided by the parties mentioned above.

[REDACTED] is not in a position to provide any support, in terms of time or resources, beyond that outlined above and should the research require additional commitments from us, we reserve the right to withdraw our assistance in the facilitation of this research.



10 June 2021

Jothie Perumal
PO Box 748
Pietermaritzburg
3200

Dear Jothie,

I am sorry it took so long for me to answer, as we had a few challenges in our organization in the last few weeks.

You are welcome to do your research in our organization. If you need any support or have challenges, feel free to contact me anytime. [REDACTED] is currently working from home but is available to assist you when needed.

Kind regards



APPENDIX 3 – ETHICAL APPROVAL LETTER



14 November 2021

Jothie Rani Perumal (911350381)
School Of Applied Human Sc
Howard College

Dear JR Perumal,

Protocol reference number: HSSREC/00003523/2021

Project title: Factors affecting educational outcomes of youth in foster care: a comparative collective case study design

Degree: PhD

Approval Notification – Expedited Application

This letter serves to notify you that your application received on 18 October 2021 in connection with the above, was reviewed by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) and the protocol has been granted FULL APPROVAL.

Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment/modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number. PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

This approval is valid until 14 November 2022.

To ensure uninterrupted approval of this study beyond the approval expiry date, a progress report must be submitted to the Research Office on the appropriate form 2 - 3 months before the expiry date. A close-out report to be submitted when study is finished.

All research conducted during the COVID-19 period must adhere to the national and UKZN guidelines.

HSSREC is registered with the South African National Research Ethics Council (REC-040414-040).

Yours sincerely,



Professor Dipane Hlalele (Chair)

/dd

Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban, 4000, South Africa

Telephone: +27 (0)31 260 8350/4557/3587 Email: hssrec@ukzn.ac.za Website: <http://research.ukzn.ac.za/Research-Ethics>

Founding Campuses: Edgewood Howard College Medical School Pietermaritzburg Westville

INSPIRING GREATNESS

APPENDIX 4: INTERVIEW THEMES WITH THE FOSTER CHILDREN

BIOGRAPHICAL DATA ON THE FOSTER CHILDREN:

Name/Pseudonym:

Age:

Race:

Gender:

Number of siblings:

Highest standard obtained:

Last school attended:

Distance to school.

• Introduction

- Building rapport with the child and creating a safe space.
- Clarifying the purpose and objectives of the study and confirming voluntary participation in the study.

• Foster placement

- Understanding the reasons for the placement in foster care.
- Relationship with the foster family (foster parents and siblings).
- Experiences and responsibilities in the foster home/ routine when they go home – time for chores, homework, leisure.

• Educational experiences

- What did they like about school/ their successes at school? What factors at school helped them perform well in school
- What were the challenges they experienced in the classroom. What were the barriers that prevented them from doing well in school?
- What motivated them to attend school regularly?
- What factors prevented them from attending school regularly?
- What factors contributed to them dropping out of school?
- Comment on whether they tried to get back to school. Who assisted? Success or failure of their attempts
- What/who were their support structures at school?
- Relationship with the educators.
- What could the educators have done differently?
- Involvement in extracurricular activities/sports.

• Role of the foster parent in respect of their education

- Availability of the foster parent to assist the child with homework/projects/attend school meetings and functions.
- Motivation from the foster parent/assistance in planning for the future.
- What expectations did the child have of the foster parent in respect of schooling?
- What could the foster parent have done differently?
- Anyone else in the foster home who could help/foster siblings?
- **Role of the social worker in respect of their education**
 - How often did they see the social worker? Relationship with the social worker.
 - What are the focus of the meetings with the social worker? Counselling on the benefits of schooling/ counselling on planning for the future.
 - What expectations did the child have of the social worker in respect of schooling?
 - What could the social worker have done differently to help them with schooling?
- **Community/environmental factors**
 - Relationship with their friends/peers as a source of support in terms of their education.
 - Positive factors in the community that facilitated their education?
 - Challenges in the community that impacted on their education.
 - If they could change something in the above to help them with schooling, what would that be?
- **Planning for the future**
 - View and thoughts on the benefits/value of schooling.
 - Thoughts on their personal goals and planning for the future.
 - What will they do differently if they could turn back the clock?
 - Their thoughts on returning to school if they are no longer schooling.
 - What do they want to share with other youth in foster care?
 - What do they want to share with foster parents?
 - What do they want to share with other people about their educational experiences (their social workers, policy makers and educators)?
- **Conclusion**
 - Summarizing and checking key issues

APPENDIX 5

THEMES (Interviews with the foster parents}

BIOGRAPHICAL DATA ON FOSTER PARENTS

Name (Pseudonym):

Gender:

Race:

Level of education:

Occupation:

Marital status:

Place of residence (rural/urban):

Sources of income:

Family income:

Number of people living in the household:

- **Introduction**

- Building rapport with the group and creating a safe space.
- Clarifying the purpose and objectives of the study and confirming voluntary participation in the study.

- **Foster placement**

- Understanding the reasons for the placement.
- Experiences of caring for a foster child.
- Describe their relationship with the foster child.

- **Role of the foster parent in respect of schooling**

- Describe the primary and secondary school education of the foster child.
- How many schools did their foster child attend?
- What factors helped the foster children perform well in school.
- Foster child's access to extra support at school – library, homework clubs, and extra classes.
- Availability of the foster parent to assist the child with homework/projects and attend school meetings and functions.
- Ability of the foster parent to help the foster child with homework/projects.
- Describe the challenges that the foster child experienced in the classroom.
- What are some of the factors contributed to the foster children dropping out of school?
- How did they deal with challenges they experienced as foster parents in respect of schooling? What worked well? What did not work?

- How did they respond when the child did well at school/did they give rewards to the child for good school performance?
 - Comment on the child's attendance at school.
 - How did they respond when the child did not perform well at school?
 - Comment on the child's daily routine to complete schoolwork/ home work/household chores.
 - Describe your relationship with the school/teachers. How have they been helpful with meeting the needs of the foster children?
 - Comment on whether they planned for the future for the foster child/ saving for the child/planning for tertiary education.
- **Role of the social worker in assisting them to meet the educational needs of their foster children**
 - Relationship with the social worker.
 - How often do they see the social worker with the foster child?
 - What are the focus of the meetings with the social worker?
 - Describe the social worker's role in terms of schooling for the foster child.
 - What are their expectations of the social worker in respect of the foster child's schooling?
 - What could the social worker have done differently to help them with the foster child's schooling?
- **Community/environmental factors**
 - What were the positive factors in the community that facilitated their education?
 - Challenges in the community that impacted on them in relation to their education.
- **Going forward**
 - What could the foster parent have done differently if they could turn back the clock in respect of the schooling for the foster child?
 - What will you tell other foster parents regarding the education of foster children?
 - What will you tell social workers regarding their role in the education of foster children?
 - What would you tell teachers regarding their role in the education of foster children?
- **Conclusion and summarizing**

APPENDIX 6

THEMES (Focus group discussions and interviews with the social workers)

BIOGRAPHICAL DATA ON SOCIAL WORKERS

Name/Pseudonym:

Race:

Gender:

Highest academic qualification:

Number of years of experience as a social worker:

Number of years of experience as a foster care social worker:

Number of years of experience at present organisation.

- **Introduction**

- Building rapport with the group and creating a safe space.
- Clarifying the purpose and objectives of the study.
- Confirming voluntary participation in the study.

- **Experience and Knowledge**

- Comment on years of experience as a social worker/foster care social worker
- What are the legislation/policies that guide a foster care social worker?
- Comment on whether they received in service training on their role as foster care social workers.

- **Role of the social worker in respect of education**

- Average number of cases/children on a foster care load.
- Comment on the frequency and nature of contact with the foster child/foster parent.
- What is the role of the social worker when it comes to placement of children at school? Change of schools
- Comment on whether the child is consulted about school choice.
- What strategies have worked for you as social workers to keep children in school?
- How often do you conduct school visits – what circumstances will prompt a school visit? Comment on the stigma of foster children at school
- How does the social work monitor the education of the foster child?
- What are the challenges that they experience in relation to assisting foster children in meeting their educational needs
- Share examples of how your efforts to keep foster children in school were not successful.

- What do you think social workers should have done differently that may have helped keep children at school?
- Share some of the reasons that foster children perform poorly at school and or drop out of school.
- Comment on the social worker's responsibilities if children are experiencing learning difficulties.
- What are the resources available for children who experience learning difficulties?
- Whose responsibility is it to refer children for further educational assessments if they need it?
- Comment on the role of social workers in helping foster children go to tertiary institutions. Share some of your success stories about foster children that have progressed to tertiary education.
- What factors will prevent foster children from pursuing a tertiary education.
- Comment on the role of foster parents in helping their foster children with educational matters? Ability and capacity of the foster parents to help foster children.
- Their thoughts on what foster parents could do differently to support foster children at school.
- Comment on the role of the school and educators in helping foster children remain at school
- Their thoughts on whether the school environment and educators can be a barrier to foster children remaining at school.
- What could educators do differently in assisting the foster child to progress at school?
- **Critical reflection on the role of social workers**
 - Their thoughts on what social workers should do to advocate for the rights of foster children to have quality education.
 - When reflecting on their role as social workers in the last three years, what are the missed opportunities concerning assisting foster children remain at school?
 - Describe the sources of support that they have in the workplace. Supervision/Debriefing/Peer support.
 - What are the challenges that the profession of social work is facing?
 - Describe their role in making input to policy and legislative changes.
 - What advice will they give themselves going forward on how to change their role

- Comment on opportunities for continued knowledge, growth, development and training, within and outside the organization.
- Describe an ideal scenario for a foster care social worker that will facilitate keeping children at school.
- Comment on what you, as a social worker need to do to get to this ideal scenario.
- **Recommendations**
 - Recommendations at practice level.
 - Recommendations for policy makers

APPENDIX 7 – DATA EXTRACTION FORM – CASE FILES

ANALYSIS OF CASE FILES:

Date of foster placement:

Reason for foster placement:

Number of foster placements:

Duration of last foster placement:

Related or unrelated foster placement:

SCHOOLING INFORMATION:

Comment on the primary school education of the child - how many primary schools attended?
Note the ages of the child in primary school. Is the age of the consistent with grade at school?

Comment on the secondary school education of the child - how many secondary schools attended? Note the ages of the child in secondary school. Is the age of the consistent with grade at school?

List current education records on file (school confirmation documents, school reports)

Note how often school reports were submitted to the social worker

Comment on attendance – number of days absent from school – note if this was addressed in counselling

Comment on behaviour in school

Comment on achievement in school

Involvement in extra-curricular

Any academic challenges noted

Was the need for educational psychologist noted? Was this facilitated and by whom?

Note if the school had requested that the foster parent attend a meeting at school

Note if the school had requested the social worker to come to the school to address concerns.

ROLE OF THE SOCIAL WORKER

Frequency of contact with the foster child

Frequency of contact with the foster parent

Last office contact between the social worker and foster children/foster parents

List dates of school visits conducted by the social worker

Comment on the behaviour of the child, if noted on the file

Note if counselling with the foster child included planning for the future/assistance with application for tertiary education

Any other specialised services that the child was referred to (psychologists)

Note changes in school, how many

Note if child was involved in other programmes (group work)

Note if Care Plans and Individual Care plans were completed for the children, in respect of education.

APPENDIX 8

INFORMED CONSENT OF FOSTER CHILDREN (ENGLISH)

P. O. Box 748

PIETERMARITZBURG

3200

Dear Sir/Madam

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH STUDY

I have been accepted into a Doctor of Philosophy Degree in Social Work, in the School of Applied Human Sciences at the University of KwaZulu Natal.

To meet the requirements of the degree I am intending to conduct research with foster children, their foster parents and their social workers. The proposed title of the project is “Factors affecting educational outcomes of foster children: A comparative collective case study design”.

The purpose of the research is to understand the experiences of foster children, their foster parents and their social workers in relation to the educational outcomes of foster children. It is envisioned that the research will lay the foundation for further studies, inform child protection agencies on strategies to support foster children in achieving positive educational outcomes and make recommendations to policy makers on relevant policies to facilitate foster children achieving positive educational outcomes.

Your participation in this research is essential and will be highly appreciated. You will be part of individual interviews. No identifying details will be required of you. All responses will be kept highly confidential. The researcher will not at any point in the research or the report identify any participant. The interviews will be audio taped and once the data is analyzed all information will be kept safely in a locked cabinet. The research will be conducted under the supervision of the School of Social Work and Community Development at the University of KwaZulu-Natal - Howard College. My supervisors are Prof V. Sewpaul and Dr B. Seepamore. All ethical issues will be considered. The details of the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee contact details are as follows: Prem Mohun, University of

KwaZulu-Natal, Research Office, Email: Hssrec@ukzn.ac.za/HssrecHumanities@ukzn.ac.za,
Phone number: 031 260 4557/4609.

Your participation in the research is voluntary and no payment will be made for your participation. You may withdraw from the research at any point with no penalty. Should you require any additional information, kindly contact me.

Yours faithfully

_____	_____	_____
Jothie Perumal	Prof. V. Sewpaul	Dr B. Seepamore
033 – 3428971	Supervisor	Supervisor

INFORMED CONSENT:

I am willing/not willing to participate in the research outlined above.

(Delete whichever is not applicable)

I, _____ the undersigned understand the contents and conditions of the research and consent to participate in the research.

I consent to be audiotaped in the interviews. Yes No

SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT

DATE:

APPENDIX 9

INFORMED CONSENT FORM – FOSTER CHILDREN (ZULU)

**INCWADI YESIVUMELWANO SABANTWANA ABANAKEKELWA ABAZALI
OKUNGESIBO BABO BEGAZI**

P. O. Box 748

PIETERMARITZBURG

3200

Mnumzane/ Nkosikazi othandekayo

IMVUME YOKUBAMBA IQHAZA ESIFUNDWENI SOKUCWANINGA

Ngamukelwe ukwenza izifundo zokuba Udokotela Weziqu Zefilosofi Kwezobusonhlalakahle Esikoleni Sezesityensi Yabantu Esetshenzisiwe eNyuvesi YaKwaZulu Natali.

Ukuhlangabezana nezidingo zalezi zifundo, ngihlose ukwenza ucwaningo ngezingane ezinakekelwa abazali okungesibo bazo, nabazali abangabanakakeli balezo ngane kanye nosonhlalakahle babo. Isihloko ehlongozwayo sephrojekthi sithi “Izinto ezithinta imiphumela yezemfundo yezingane ezikhuliswa abazali okungesibo bazo: Idizayini yokuqhathanisa yocwaningo olohlangene”.

Inhloso yalolucwaningo ukuqonda izinto abadlula kuzo noma abahlangana nazo abantwana abanakekelwayo, abazali abangabanakakeli kanye nosonhlalakahle babo, lezo zinto ezinomthelela kwimiphumela yezifundo zabantwana abanakekelwayo. Kulindeleke ukuthi lolucwaningo lubeke isisekelo ezifundweni ezengeziwe, luzohlomisa futhi izinhlaka ezimelele ukuvikela abantwana maqondanda namasu okusekela abantwana ukuze bathole imiphumela emihle ezifundweni, luphinde lwenze iziphakamiso kuzo izishaya mthetho ukuze kuthazwe abantwana abakhuliswa abazali okungesibo babo bangampela ekutheni bathole imiphumela emihle yokufunda.

Ukubamba kwakho iqhaza kulolucwaningo kubalulekile futhi kuyancomeka. Uzoba ingxenye yexingxoxo ezizokwenziwa kumuntu ngayedwa. Ngeke idingeke imininingwane yakho ezokuveza ukuthi ungubani. Zonke izimpendulo zakho zizogcinwa ziyimfihlo enkulu. Umcwaningi ngeke noma nini ocwaningweni noma embikweni akhombe noma yimuphi

umuntu obambe iqhaza. Izingxoxo zizoqoshwa ngesiqophamazwi, uma sekuqediwe ukuhlaziya ulwazi oluqoqiwe zizobe sezivalelwa ekhabetheni elikhiyiwe. Ucwangingo luzokwenziwa ngaphansi kweso Lwesikole Somsebenzi Wezenhlalakahle Nokuthuthukiswa Komphakathi eNyuvesi YaKwaZulu-Natali- Howard College. Abaqondisi bami nguProf V. Sewpaul noDkt B. Seepamore. Zonke izindaba zokuziphatha zizobhekwa. Imininingwane yokuxhumana yeKomidi Lokuziphatha Kwabantu Nesayensi Yezenhlalo ithi:

Prem Mohun, Inyuvesi yaKwaZulu-Natali, iHhovisi Locwangingo i-imeyili: Hssrec@ukzn.ac.za/HssrecHumanities@ukzn.ac.za, Inombolo yocingo: 031 260 4557/ 4609.

Ukubamba kwakho iqhaza ocwangingweni kwenziwa ngokuzithandela futhi akukho nkokhelo ezokwenziwa ngokubamba kwakho iqhaza. Ungahoxa ocwangingweni nganoma isiphi isikhathi ngaphandle kwenhlawulo. Uma kwenzeka udinga ulwazi elungeziwe, wamukelekile ukungithinta.

Ozithithobayo

_____	_____	_____
Jothie Perumal	Prof. V. Sewpaul	Dkt B. Seepamore
033 – 3428971	Umphathi	Umphathi

ISIVUMELWANO ESINOLWAZI:

Ngizimisele / angizimisele ukubamba iqhaza ocwangingweni oluchazwe ngenhla.

(Susa noma yikuphi okungasebenzi)

Mina, _____ osayine ngezansi ngiyakuqonda okuqukethwe nemibandela yocwangingo kanye nemvume yokubamba iqhaza ocwangingweni.

Ngiyavuma ukuqoshwa ngokulalelwayo ezingxoxweni. Yebo Cha

ISIGINESHA YOBAMBE IQHAZA

USUKU:

APPENDIX 10

INFORMED CONSENT OF FOSTER PARENTS (ENGLISH)

P. O. Box 748

PIETERMARITZBURG

3200

Dear Sir/Madam

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH STUDY

I have been accepted into a Doctor of Philosophy Degree in Social Work, in the School of Applied Human Sciences at the University of KwaZulu Natal.

To meet the requirements of the degree I am intending to conduct research with foster children, their foster parents and their social workers. The proposed title of the project is “Factors affecting educational outcomes of foster children: A comparative collective case study design”.

The purpose of the research is to understand the experiences of foster children, their foster parents and their social workers in relation to the educational outcomes of foster children. It is envisioned that the research will lay the foundation for further studies, inform child protection agencies on strategies to support foster children in achieving positive educational outcomes and make recommendations to policy makers on relevant policies to facilitate foster children achieving positive educational outcomes.

Your participation in this research is essential and will be highly appreciated. You will be part of focus group discussions. No identifying details will be required of you. All responses will be kept highly confidential. The researcher will not at any point in the research or the report identify any participant. The interviews will be audio taped and once the data is analyzed all information will be kept safely in a locked cabinet. The research will be conducted under the supervision of the School of Social Work and Community Development at the University of KwaZulu-Natal - Howard College. My supervisors are Prof V. Sewpaul and Dr B. Seepamore. All ethical issues will be considered. The details of the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee contact details are as follows: Prem Mohun, University of

KwaZulu-Natal, Research Office, Email: Hssrec@ukzn.ac.za/HssrecHumanities@ukzn.ac.za,
Phone number: 031 260 4557/4609.

Your participation in the research is voluntary and no payment will be made for your participation. You may withdraw from the research at any point with no penalty. Should you require any additional information, kindly contact me.

Yours faithfully

_____	_____	_____
Jothie Perumal	Prof. V. Sewpaul	Dr B. Seepamore
033 – 3428971	Supervisor	Supervisor

INFORMED CONSENT:

I am willing/not willing to participate in the research outlined above.

(Delete whichever is not applicable)

I, _____ the undersigned understand the contents and conditions of the research and consent to participate in the research.

I consent to be audiotaped in the focus group discussions. Yes No

SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT

DATE:

APPENDIX 11

INFORMED CONSENT OF FOSTER PARENTS (ZULU)

**INCWADI YESIVUMELWANO SABAZALI ABANGABANAKEKELI BABANTWANA
OKUNGESIBO BABO BEGAZI.**

P. O. Box 748

PIETERMARITZBURG

3200

Mnumzane/ Nkosikazi othandekayo

IMVUME YOKUBAMBA IQHAZA ESIFUNDWENI SOKUCWANINGA

Ngamukelwe ukwenza izifundo zokuba Udokotela Weziqu Zefilosofi Kwezobusonhlalakahle Esikoleni Sezesityensi Yabantu Esetshenzisiwe eNyuvesi YaKwaZulu Natali.

Ukuhlangabezana nezidingo zalezi zifundo, ngihlose ukwenza ucwaningo ngezingane ezinakekelwa abazali okungesibo bazo, nabazali abangabanakakeli balezo ngane kanye nosonhlalakahle babo. Isihloko ehlongozwayo sephrojekthi sithi “Izinto ezithinta imiphumela yezemfundo yezingane ezikhuliswa abazali okungesibo bazo: Idizayini yokuqhathanisa yocwaningo olohlangene”.

Inhloso yalolucwaningo ukuqonda izinto abadlula kuzo noma abahlangana nazo abantwana abanakekelwayo, abazali abangabanakakeli kanye nosonhlalakahle babo, lezo zinto ezinomthelela kwimiphumela yezifundo zabantwana abanakekelwayo. Kulindeleke ukuthi lolucwaningo lubeke isisekelo ezifundweni ezengeziwe, luzohlomisa futhi izinhlaka ezimelele ukuvikela abantwana maqondanda namasu okusekela abantwana ukuze bathole imiphumela emihle ezifundweni, luphinde lwenze iziphakamiso kuzo izishaya mthetho ukuze kuthazwe abantwana abakhuliswa abazali okungesibo babo bangampela ekutheni bathole imiphumela emihle yokufunda.

Ukubamba kwakho iqhaza kulolucwaningo kubalulekile futhi kuyancomeka. Uzoba ingxenye yexingxoxo ezizokwenziwa kumuntu ngayedwa. Ngeke idingeke imininingwane yakho ezokuveza ukuthi ungubani. Zonke izimpendulo zakho zizogcinwa ziyimfihlo enkulu. Umcwaningi ngeke noma nini ocwaningweni noma embikweni akhombe noma yimuphi

umuntu obambe iqhaza. Izingxoxo zizoqoshwa ngesiqophamazwi, uma sekuqediwe ukuhlaziya ulwazi oluqoqiwe zizobe sezivalelwa ekhabetheni elikhiyiwe. Ucwangingo luzokwenziwa ngaphansi kweso Lwesikole Somsebenzi Wezenhlalakahle Nokuthuthukiswa Komphakathi eNyuvesi YaKwaZulu-Natali- Howard College. Abaqondisi bami nguProf V. Sewpaul noDkt B. Seepamore. Zonke izindaba zokuziphatha zizobhekwa. Imininingwane yokuxhumana yeKomidi Lokuziphatha Kwabantu Nesayensi Yezenhlalo ithi:

Prem Mohun, Inyuvesi yaKwaZulu-Natali, iHhovisi Locwangingo i-imeyili: Hssrec@ukzn.ac.za/HssrecHumanities@ukzn.ac.za, Inombolo yocingo: 031 260 4557/ 4609.

Ukubamba kwakho iqhaza ocwangingweni kwenziwa ngokuzithandela futhi akukho nkokhelo ezokwenziwa ngokubamba kwakho iqhaza. Ungahoxa ocwangingweni nganoma isiphi isikhathi ngaphandle kwenhlawulo. Uma kwenzeka udinga ulwazi elungeziwe, wamukelekile ukungithinta.

Ozithithobayo

_____	_____	_____
Jothie Perumal	Prof. V. Sewpaul	Dkt B. Seepamore
033 – 3428971	Umphathi	Umphathi

ISIVUMELWANO ESINOLWAZI:

Ngizimisele / angizimisele ukubamba iqhaza ocwangingweni oluchazwe ngenhla.

(Susa noma yikuphi okungasebenzi)

Mina, _____ osayine ngezansi ngiyakuqonda okuqukethwe nemibandela yocwangingo kanye nemvume yokubamba iqhaza ocwangingweni.

Ngiyavuma ukuqoshwa ngokulalelwayo ezingxoxweni. Yebo Cha

ISIGINESHA YOBAMBE IQHAZA

USUKU:

APPENDIX 12

INFORMED CONSENT OF SOCIAL WORKERS

P. O. Box 748

PIETERMARITZBURG

3200

Dear Sir/Madam

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH STUDY

I have been accepted into a Doctor of Philosophy Degree in Social Work, in the School of Applied Human Sciences at the University of KwaZulu Natal.

To meet the requirements of the degree I am intending to conduct research with foster children, their foster parents and their social workers. The proposed title of the project is "Factors affecting educational outcomes of foster children: A comparative collective case study design".

The purpose of the research is to understand the experiences of foster children, their foster parents and their social workers in relation to the educational outcomes of foster children. It is envisioned that the research will lay the foundation for further studies, inform child protection agencies on strategies to support foster children in achieving positive educational outcomes and make recommendations to policy makers on relevant policies to facilitate foster children achieving positive educational outcomes.

Your participation in this research is essential and will be highly appreciated. You will be part of focus group discussions. No identifying details will be required of you. All responses will be kept highly confidential. The researcher will not at any point in the research or the report identify any participant. The interviews will be audio taped and once the data is analyzed all information will be kept safely in a locked cabinet. The research will be conducted under the supervision of the School of Social Work and Community Development at the University of KwaZulu-Natal - Howard College. My supervisors are Prof V. Sewpaul and Dr B. Seepamore. All ethical issues will be considered. The details of the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee contact details are as follows: Prem Mohun, University of

KwaZulu-Natal, Research Office, Email: Hssrec@ukzn.ac.za/HssrecHumanities@ukzn.ac.za,
Phone number: 031 260 4557/4609.

Your participation in the research is voluntary and no payment will be made for your participation. You may withdraw from the research at any point with no penalty. Should you require any additional information, kindly contact me.

Yours faithfully

_____	_____	_____
Jothie Perumal	Prof. V. Sewpaul	Dr B. Seepamore
033 – 3428971	Supervisor	Supervisor

INFORMED CONSENT:

I am willing/not willing to participate in the research outlined above.

(Delete whichever is not applicable)

I, _____ the undersigned understand the contents and conditions of the research and consent to participate in the research.

I consent to be audiotaped in the focus group discussions. Yes No

SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT

DATE:

APPENDIX 13

CONFIRMATION OF COUNSELLING SERVICE



2 November 2021

Dear ~~Jothie~~

CONFIRMATION OF COUNSELLING SERVICES TO PARTICIPANTS IN THE RESEARCH STUDY

Your letter received on 2 November 2021 refers.

This organisation's letter granting Mrs Perumal permission to conduct research at the organization refers.

This further serves to inform that counselling services will be made available to the participants, if the need arises, following their participation in the study.

Kind regards





3 November 2021

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

The Society's letter dated 25 May 2021 granting Mrs. ~~Jothie~~ Perumal permission to conduct research at the organization , as per the stipulated requirements, refers.

We furthermore can confirm that counselling services will be made available to the participants, if such need arises, following their participation in the study.





03 November 2021

CONFIRMATION OF COUNSELLING SERVICES TO PARTICIPANTS IN THE RESEARCH STUDY

Dear ~~Jothie~~ Perumal

This letter serves to inform that counselling services will be made available to the participants, if the need arises, following their participation in the study,

Warm regards



1

03 November 2021



To whom it may concern

This is to confirm that [REDACTED] has Social Workers on its staff who would offer counselling to individuals associated with our organisation who participate in Mrs Perumal's research study, should the need arise.

Yours sincerely



J PERUMAL - FINAL SUBMISSION.docx

by Jothie Perumal

Submission date: 30-Mar-2025 01:29PM (UTC+0200)
Submission ID: 2613411618
File name: J_PERUMAL_-_FINAL_SUBMISSION.docx (909.7K)
Word count: 96907
Character count: 548734

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