



The Psychosocial Experiences of Foster Parents Caring for Children in Cluster Foster Care Schemes in South Africa

Sheree Adams & Zaytoon Amod

To cite this article: Sheree Adams & Zaytoon Amod (2025) The Psychosocial Experiences of Foster Parents Caring for Children in Cluster Foster Care Schemes in South Africa, *Child Care in Practice*, 31:3, 423-437, DOI: [10.1080/13575279.2025.2451624](https://doi.org/10.1080/13575279.2025.2451624)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13575279.2025.2451624>



© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 28 Mar 2025.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



Article views: 769



[View related articles](#)



[View Crossmark data](#)

The Psychosocial Experiences of Foster Parents Caring for Children in Cluster Foster Care Schemes in South Africa

Sheree Adams and Zaytoon Amod 

Department of Psychology, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

ABSTRACT

This qualitative research study sought to gain insight into the psychosocial experiences of foster parents providing care to orphans and vulnerable children within Cluster Foster Care schemes. The sample consisted of 12 foster mothers, sampled from a Cluster Foster Care scheme in Kwa-Zulu Natal, South Africa. Using a self-developed semi-structured interview schedule, insight was gained into the complexity of foster mothers' roles, and their day-to-day experiences. The interviews were analysed using interpretive thematic analysis. The results showed that the role of the foster parent is characterised by both positive and negative experiences which impact their psychosocial wellbeing. In particular, the behavioural and emotional challenges demonstrated by the children they care for have implications for their emotional and psychological wellbeing. Foster mothers are often left with feelings of anxiety, guilt, frustration, hurt, hopelessness, inadequacy and failure. Many of the foster mothers rely on the emotional, spiritual and physical support, that they receive from the other foster mothers and professionals in the village. In addition to this, the results also demonstrated that when foster mothers felt unsupported, their desire to discontinue their fostering role increased. However, the training programmes and positive experiences in the village appeared to play a protective role, mitigating the risk of placement breakdown. The findings indicate that training programmes, assist in appropriately upskilling foster mothers, enabling them to face the daily challenges associated with fostering.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 9 May 2024

Accepted 7 January 2025

KEYWORDS

Foster mothers; Cluster Foster Care (CFC); psychosocial experiences; foster parent training and support

Introduction

In 2011, South Africa was home to roughly 3 million orphans, which equates to 19.6% of children (Republic of South Africa, 2011). While the percentage of orphans has dropped to 14% of the child population in 2020, because of improved access to anti-retroviral treatments, the number of orphans in South Africa is still high, with 2.8 million children being orphaned (Hall, 2022). These children, who require care and protection, whose

CONTACT Zaytoon Amod  artlan@mweb.co.za  Department of Psychology, University of the Witwatersrand, Private Bag 3, Wits, 2050, Johannesburg, South Africa

© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

biological family cannot provide the appropriate care, may be placed within the alternative care system. This placement may either be permanent or temporary in nature, and includes all forms of care including adoption, foster care, and kinship care (van der Walt, 2018). In South Africa the foster care system is guided by several national and international frameworks, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (African Union, 1990), and the Children's Act (Republic of South Africa, 2005). The setting of this research study is a Cluster Foster Care (CFC) scheme. This is a temporary form of care consisting of a cluster of homes containing one or more foster mothers who provide care to no more than six children (Republic of South Africa, 2005) under the supervision of social workers. The study aimed to explore the psychosocial experiences of foster mothers who are providing care to children residing within a CFC scheme.

While placing children within the care of their immediate families has distinct advantages and preference is given to kinship care, the increasing prevalence of orphaned and vulnerable children in South Africa (van der Walt, 2018) has resulted in the deterioration of traditional kinship structures. If there are no related or unrelated foster parents available, the South African children's court may order that the child be placed within Cluster Foster Care. CFC schemes originally arose from the need to care for children within the community and resulted in community members subsequently assuming the role of caregiver (Du Toit et al., 2016). The South African Children's Act (Republic of South Africa, 2005) provides guidelines concerning the registration and minimum standards for CFC schemes. These schemes are managed by registered non-profit organisations.

An advantage of CFC schemes is their ability to provide children with a familial environment. The clustering of homes allows foster parents to share resources and provide each other with support (Du Toit et al., 2016). In this way, these schemes provide a village-like, community-based support system. Foster care homes within these schemes are unique in that they aim to provide children with the experience of being held by a mother, and a village community, who are all working together towards the upbringing of the child. This differs from what may be found within the international foster care systems. While group homes are common, instances of foster care provided in the form of a village or community-like structure are scarce. Similar models include group homes, situated within the community, with foster parents receiving financial and socio-emotional support from the overarching non-governmental organisation (Hong et al., 2015). Children's "villages" have also been noted in Israel (Bat Or & Zusman-Bloch, 2022), while more notable instances of the village like structure are the SOS Children's Villages which have been researched in China and Ukraine (Hryshchenko & Buzhina, 2022), Pakistan (Lassi et al., 2011), Nigeria and Portugal (Adeboye et al., 2019) as well as Indonesia (Ismail & Putri, 2022). However, international research into the wellbeing of foster parents in children's villages is limited. Similarly, not only is research into schemes in South Africa limited, but studies examining the experiences of foster parents within these schemes are also scarce. Existing studies on CFC schemes have focused on the experiences of those transitioning out of care (Goemans et al., 2021), Cluster Foster Care as an alternative care model (Gallinetti & Sloth-Nielsen, 2014), the suitability of Cluster Foster Care compared to kinship care (Kang'ethe & Nyasha, 2014) as well as the operationalisation of the Cluster Foster Care system (Du Toit et al., 2016).

The role of the foster parent includes numerous stressors that surpass the challenges that ordinary parenting poses (Mancinelli et al., 2021). Foster parents have the substantial responsibility of caring for orphans and vulnerable children, and they play a crucial role in determining child outcomes. Many of the children within their care demonstrate a multitude of behavioural, psychological, emotional, and educational challenges. They have been shown to demonstrate increased internalising and externalising behaviours (Hiller et al., 2023; Jacobsen et al., 2020; Lohaus et al., 2017). International literature has indicated that these challenges can have a significant impact on foster parents' experiences, often resulting in parental stress (Lohaus et al., 2017; Rogowska et al., 2022) and compassion fatigue (Hannah & Woolgar, 2018; Verheyden et al., 2020). Foster parents are also placed at greater risk of experiencing mental and physical health difficulties (Mancinelli et al., 2021). These factors have the potential to impact parent job satisfaction as well as the quality of care that they provide.

Studies have demonstrated that the informal and formal social support networks that foster parents have act as a protective factor against compassion fatigue (Sharda, 2022). These networks of support can have a positive influence on familial and parental well-being as well as on the nature and quality of their parenting (Salloum et al., 2015). Therefore, it may be argued that providing foster parents with adequate social and professional support can not only influence their experiences of compassion fatigue but may also have an impact on child outcomes (Cooley et al., 2019). However, despite its positive influence, research has demonstrated that foster parents often receive inadequate social and professional support (Cooley et al., 2017). This has negative implications for the foster care system, as it has the potential to lead to placement breakdowns.

In contrast to parental stress and compassion fatigue, compassion satisfaction may be defined as the positive emotional response, fulfilment and gratification that comes as a result of aiding and caring for others (Hannah & Woolgar, 2018; Ray et al., 2013). While research has shown a correlation between compassion satisfaction in foster parents, their intent to continue fostering and their levels of job satisfaction (Hannah & Woolgar, 2018), research on the factors contributing to their experiences of compassion satisfaction is, however, limited.

In addition to social support, given the wide range of challenges that foster parents face, it is vital that foster parents are provided with specialised education and skills that can assist them in managing the unique and complex needs of the children placed in their care (Rork & McNeil, 2011). Kaasbøll et al. (2019) argue that foster parent training may be seen as being a vital prerequisite to successful fostering, and aids in preventing placement breakdowns for both foster parents and children.

Method

A qualitative, interpretive research paradigm was utilised to gain insight into the subjective realities and psychosocial experiences of foster mothers.

Research setting, sampling, and participants

The 12 volunteer participants were drawn from a Cluster Foster Care (CFC) scheme located in Durban, Kwa-Zulu-Natal (KZN) province. A non-probability purposive

sampling technique was used to obtain participants who possessed the necessary characteristics to provide the required information related to the study due to their knowledge and/or their experiences (Etikan et al., 2016). The main inclusion criterion was that the CFC scheme was registered with the government's Department of Social Development in KZN. The sampling process began by approaching the CFC scheme and inviting them to participate in the research. A letter requesting permission to invite the foster mothers to participate in the research study was sent to the CFC scheme. Once the village had granted the researchers permission to engage with potential participants, the CFC scheme invited them to meet the foster mothers face-to-face, to inform them of the research project. At this meeting, the foster mothers were invited to participate in the research project. They were provided with a slip of paper, on which they could indicate whether they wanted to participate in the research. Completed slips were then folded and placed in a container. A list of participants was then collated, allowing for the participants to be allocated a time for their interview.

Table 1 below, provides a description of each of the 12 participants, and their relevant demographic information. Most of the participants were between the ages of 46 and 50 years. The foster mothers were also caring for an average of four to six children and the majority of them had an average of more than six years of experience.

Instrument

A semi-structured interview schedule, using open-ended questions, was developed to provide a flexible guide for collecting the data. Questions asked in the interviews included an exploration of the reasons for becoming a foster parent, what the best parts of being a foster mother were perceived to be, the difficulties and challenges faced by the foster mothers, and how they coped with these experiences. Participants were also asked about the training and other support they had received as foster parents and if there were ways in which the support that they received could be improved. The interview schedule was developed in both English and isiZulu, the official mother-tongue language used in the KZN province. All research materials can be accessed from the first author.

Table 1. Demographic information of the participants.

Name	Age range	Number of years as a foster mother	Number of children being cared for
Sinovuyo	40–45 years	6+ years	1–3
Gugulethu	46–50 years	1–5 years	4–6
Lerato	50+ years	6+ years	4–6
Nandi	50+ years	6+ years	4–6
Duduzile	40–45 years	6+ years	4–6
Busisiwe	46–50 years	6+ years	4–6
Owethu	46–50 years	6+ years	4–6
Zinhle	46–50 years	6+ years	4–6
Simphiwe	50+ years	6+ years	4–6
Khanyisile	50+ years	1–5 years	1–3
Thandiwe	46–50 years	6+ years	1–3
Hlengiwe	46–50 years	1–5 years	4–6

Procedure

Ethical clearance was obtained to conduct the study from the University of Witwatersrand's Human Research Ethics committee non-medical (Ethics Clearance Certificate Number: MEDPSYC/21/01). Thereafter the director of the CFC scheme was approached and permission to conduct the study at this setting was granted. All the foster mothers employed at the CFC scheme were invited to participate in the study through a face-to-face meeting with the first author. In addition to a verbal explanation, a written Participant Information Sheet was provided which outlined the aims and rationale of the study, what participation in the study would entail, and the rights and risks of participation. These were provided in English and isiZulu. The details of the researchers were included in this information sheet and those interested in participating in the study were asked to contact the first author who conducted the semi-structured interviews. Two of the 12 foster mothers required a translator. The duration of the interviews was approximately one hour.

A distress protocol was put in place, which included details for free counselling. An independent counselling centre located in Durban, KZN, provided these services. After the interview, all participants underwent a debriefing process. During this debriefing session, the research interviewer, who was at the time a psychologist in training under professional supervision assessed the participants' emotional state, acknowledging that some of the information shared may have elicited strong emotions. The participants were invited to ask questions and to discuss their thoughts and feelings regarding the interview. None of the participants overtly demonstrated signs of distress or expressed the need for follow-up counselling during the interviews.

Ethical considerations

Prior to the commencement of the interviews, written informed consent was obtained from the participants to partake in the research and to be audio recorded. A confidentiality agreement was signed by the translator. Written consent was sought from the participants to have a translator in the room. Participants also maintained their right not to answer questions that they found uncomfortable and to withdraw from the study at any point. The interview transcripts were anonymised using pseudonyms, which were also utilised in the reporting of the results.

Data analysis

Thematic Analysis was used to guide the analysis of the data, and allowed researchers to identify, analyse and report on the patterns by immersing themselves within the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Using a phenomenological framework, the researchers sought to gain an understanding of the patterns of meaning made by the participants, based on their daily, lived experiences (Sunder et al., 2019), which aided in the interpretation of the data.

The researchers made use of the steps of Thematic Analysis stipulated by Braun and Clarke (2006). This began with the researchers familiarising themselves with the data by transcribing the interviews, reading and rereading them (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The

researchers read through the transcripts multiple times, noting any patterns, thoughts, feelings and observations that arose. This aided in developing initial thoughts and ideas. Once this had been completed, the researcher began colour coding the transcripts, based on the patterns observed. The colour coded quotes were then organised into groups. In this way, initial codes were generated. These codes were then cross-checked against the original dataset and against the researchers' interpretations (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Once the initial codes had been generated, the researcher analysed them again, noting patterns and similarities between the different codes. In this way the codes were grouped and organised into potential overarching themes, and subthemes. The researchers generated a thematic map, which noted all themes, subthemes and their relevant quotations. This thematic map was then used to produce the final research report, which details the collective meanings and experiences demonstrated within the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012).

Rigour

Credibility of the research was enhanced as participants were selected through purposive sampling. Peer consultation and debriefing allowed for cross-checking and interpretation of the data. To uphold authenticity, use of Braun and Clarke's (2006) the six-step thematic analysis process guided the researchers in generating accurate themes and reflections of the participants' lived experiences. A reflective diary was utilised throughout the research process and reflexivity was used to enhance confirmability and authenticity. Verbatim transcripts of the recorded interviews further assured confirmability of the research findings, contributing to its reliability. A detailed description of the study is provided so that the reader can judge its transferability to other settings.

Results

The five main themes that emerged in the study are presented below.

Positive experiences

Many of the foster mothers discussed the joy that they experienced in witnessing the growth of the children. The mothers discussed their hope for the children's success as they grow up. For example, Hlengiwe spoke about her hope for their success and the role that she might play in their achievements, saying "Just to love them and seeing them growing and even see their future when they grow up." I believe that whatever I'm planting now, even if I retire ... my hope is that they will be okay in life.

When discussing their positive experiences some of the mothers spoke about the joy they had experienced by becoming a mother, and that this has allowed them to have a family. For example, Gugulethu stated:

The best one is that ... to see the children that it's not my biological call me "ma". I didn't ever think that I would raise a child that is not my own ... And love them as my own. And they love me as their mother ... That is the best part in life.

Many of the foster mothers discussed the way in which becoming a foster mother has led to their own personal growth. For example, some mothers discussed the learning they have experienced as foster mother. Busisiwe stated, “During the time that I’m staying with them, I’m teaching them but at the same time I’m learning from them too ... Yeah. It’s like we teaching each other.” Owethu highlighted how rewarding the journey of being a foster mother has been, and the personal change it has brought, saying,

So, I came here thinking that I’ll take care of the children or change the lives of the children, but they changed mine. Just staying in the same house with children from different backgrounds, different situations, circumstances. It ... it just ummm healed me.

Challenges

One of the most significant challenges that foster mothers raised was the difficulty they were experiencing in caring for the adolescents. Busisiwe stated as follows: “when I’m with the children I like to be happy with them, have fun, all that stuff ... but sometimes I don’t have all that with these children I’m staying with because you know the teenagers ...”. Gugulethu also highlighted the adolescents’ defiance which comes with the knowledge that she is not their biological mother stating, “... especially for the teenagers. The teenagers doesn’t like to listen or they don’t want to listen to you just because they know that you are not the biological mother ...”. Owethu echoed these sentiments and described the difficulties that come because of this adolescent defiance, saying: “The hardest part of being a foster mother is when the teenager girls reach that stage when they don’t want to listen anymore.”

Duduzile described the traumas that many of the children experience stating that “most of the children they endure being raped out there, being abused and everything.” She later went on to discuss the child trauma in terms of suitcases—illustrating the ‘baggage’ that many of the children carry, and the way in which their difficulties are revealed to her slowly. Thandiwe added that the traumas that the children experienced prior to arriving at the village made it difficult to get them to trust her. She stated:

Because here you find that ... they ... she’s emotionally hurt, physically hurt, raped. You must think of something bad they are coming from. They are ... issues, bitterness ... everything they are coming from. They are not like our children outside there. Because I raised them freely with no problem, they know I’m their mother. Here you have to create something to ... just to ... gain their trust.

Many of the foster mothers also discussed the internalising and externalising behaviours demonstrated by the children and the significant impact that it was having on them. For example, Sinovuyo shared that some of the children hit her, which evokes an emotional response within her. She went on to discuss the impact that the children’s emotions have on her. She began by saying:

Maybe I’m trying to talk with the child and they hitting me. ... So, it’s a big challenge, when maybe the kids, they not listening ... If they are hurt, even me I am getting hurt because they taking their anger and push it to me.

Duduzile expressed the mental and emotional difficulty she has in not being able to heal the children’s distress, saying:

Emotionally it is so difficult ... There is something in this one child as an example that I cannot touch. I cannot heal. I cannot nurture. Yeah. That is a difficult part. Just seeing a child that you cannot touch something that is happening inside. Yeah, it's painful.

Mothers also expressed having feelings of failure, guilt, and inadequacy. Owethu discussed these feelings of failure and their presence when adolescent girls do not want to listen. She described these feeling by saying:

But you will be wondering "am I a failure?" Or "have I failed somewhere". You keep on blaming yourself. "Maybe I'm not doing what I'm supposed to do. That is why they are doing what they are doing". So that's the hardest part. Of just ... uh ... keep on blaming yourself.

Nandi discussed these feelings in relation to the behavioural challenges presented by some of the boys, saying, "Sometimes when they are doing naughty, like boys ... the child has done this thing and so it feels like ... feel like a failure."

Foster mothers often expressed frustration at not being valued and trusted in their roles. Many mothers discussed their desire for the children to see the work, love, and effort that they have been putting in to care for them, alluding to the feelings of inadequacy that they were experiencing. For example, Busisiwe voiced her desire that the children will come to this realisation over time, saying "... but I hope ... we hope that as the time goes by, they will see what we teaching them ... Yeah. They will realize our care for them."

Available support

One of the most significant factors discussed by mothers, was the support that they receive from the other foster mothers at the village. They highlighted the interconnect-edness of their group, and the way in which they rely on each other for emotional and physical support and guidance in raising the children. Lerato discussed the way in which the other mothers provide support when they are experiencing challenges, saying "Other mums. I spoke to other mums ... with my difficulties. We share ... we share everything ... we share our troubles." She went on to say, "They support me ... yeah, we pray together ... we share everything together. We try to bring a solution." Hlengiwe supported this saying "Just to go to my neighbour or other mothers in the clusters and sit with her and pray about the situation. That helps."

In addition to getting support from the other mothers, the foster mothers also highlighted the important role that management and social workers play in providing them with both emotional and psychological support. For example, Busisiwe discussed the fact that she can approach the social workers when she feels like she is experiencing difficulties saying: "I have support ... Because if I can say that no I don't know how to solve this problem, I come to them and talk to them, put it on the table and from there they take over". Zinhle discussed the range of individuals that they have available to them saying, "We are having pastors here. We are having social workers. We are having the teachers. We are having so many people that are helping us to ... in this journey, as well as the other mothers within the cluster." Finally, it is noteworthy that some foster mothers discussed the fact that they do not require any additional support. For example, Busisiwe spoke about her reliance on the Lord for this, saying that "I never go to psychology. I do believe in myself that if I speak to God, yeah ... I speak to God 'cause I speak

freely. Then after that I feel I'm calm". Thandiwe discussed the need to keep her emotions to herself, saying that "they taught us how to control your emotion". She went on to say that "I don't take my emotional problems to the people around me."

Need for further support

While the mothers acknowledged the available sources of support they had, the significant role that psychologists and professional counsellors can play in providing the psychological and emotional support that they needed was reflected on by three of the foster mothers. They stated that they sometimes required a different form of support than what they receive from their pastoral team, management, and the social workers. Duduzile stated that:

Because with the pastoral ... they are not psychologists. We pray, we read the Word. But sometimes ... that works, that works ... but sometimes umm ... I think it just suppresses the core of the problem that I'm dealing with as a mother ... you know ...

A few of the mothers felt a lack emotional and psychological support from the village staff. For example, Owethu shared as follows:

Sometimes we feel like we are on our own. The moment they signed the child to you, they will promise you that ... "we will be there for you". Then that's it ... they are gone. They will never come back until they see your face, and you say "I'm struggling with this and this and this". I need help.

Sinovuyo discussed the fact that as foster mothers, they need help in supporting the emotional wellbeing of the child, and that this support is not available to them, saying "They lacking with the emotional ... if they see I'm getting a new child who's coming on the drugs, they must help me ... to make a change with that child ... "

An analysis of the data indicated that there is an intricate connection between the mothers' desire to continue fostering, and the level of support that they are receiving. Gugulethu discussed the difficult time that she had experienced in the village, and the fact that she had wanted to leave saying, "There was a time this year when ... it was a hard time for me. And really, I was saying that I'm leaving because I don't see any support. Even from my social worker."

Training

The training programmes at the village play a significant role in supporting and upskilling the foster mothers. Not only do foster mothers receive training upon entering the village, but they also attend weekly training sessions. The interviews demonstrated that foster mothers place significant value in these training programmes as an important source of knowledge. For example, Sinovuyo stated that "the training they gave me they prepare me to be a foster parent. Sometimes I'm not qualified but because they train me, they give me knowledge".

Many of the mothers highlighted the importance of parental training regarding childhood traumas. For example, Zinhle discussed the way in which she had at first believed that she did not need to be trained in parenting, but later came to appreciate

its importance and value, particularly with regards to raising children with past trauma. Foster mothers also called for additional training on how to parent and care for teenagers. Duduzile began by saying, “I don’t know how to deal with teenagers. Maybe if we can get more ummm. More trainings on that. Cause now we dealing with teenagers more ...”

Discussion

Foster parents play an important role in caring for orphans and vulnerable children and are crucial in determining child outcomes. The role of foster parents is complex and challenging, and often results in foster parents experiencing high levels of parental stress and frustration. Not only does this have the potential to impact their psychosocial wellbeing, but it also impacts their ability to manage the daily challenges that come with caregiving (Harding et al., 2020; Rogowska et al., 2022). In addition, it has also been shown to play a significant role in placement disruptions for children (Hannah & Woolgar, 2018; Leathers et al., 2019).

The results of this study, which was conducted within a Cluster Foster Care (CFC) setting, demonstrated that the role of the foster mother is characterised by both positive and challenging experiences. Consistent with other studies such as Daniel (2011) the foster mothers noted the joy in watching the children grow and develop. It is noteworthy that their positive experiences have been shown to impact the satisfaction that they receive from their role. In addition, their role as foster mother appeared to influence their personal and maternal identity. This differed from the results obtained by Sprecher et al. (2021) whose participants often did not consider themselves to be parents of the children they cared for, neither did they feel that their role could be classified as being professional in nature. Instead, they perceived their role to lie somewhere in-between the two. The foster mother’s perception of their identity and role, within this study, allowed for the healing of their personal traumas and acted as a protective factor against their desire to terminate their position. This is congruent with previous literature, which notes that foster parents’ informal learning, which occurs through daily experiences, can lead to personal growth and development. These experiences encourage self-reflection in foster parents and assists them in becoming ‘good enough’ foster parents (Bagdonaite-Stelmokiene & Zydziunaite, 2020). Significantly, research has shown that as foster parents gain more experience, they become more resilient, and are able to adapt more easily to the challenges of fostering (Lietz et al., 2016). In this way, the personal development of foster mothers through experiential learning, may have implications for foster parent retention.

In contrast, adverse experiences, coupled with a lack of emotional support have been shown to not only have negative implications for the psychosocial wellbeing of foster mothers (Rogowska et al., 2022) but these experiences have been shown to lead to parental stress, burnout, and compassion fatigue. The foster mothers in this study shared that they receive much ongoing support from each other, which aligns with the findings of Pope et al. (2022), who note that peer mentoring has the capacity to assist in reducing the burnout among foster parents, and aids in foster parent retention. Despite this, foster mothers within this study noted that the lack of emotional and psychological support from psychologists and counsellors increases the likelihood that

they will terminate their role. Furthermore, they highlighted the challenges of caring for children who have experienced trauma as well as with the caring of adolescents due to their defiant and risky behaviour. This is supported by Taylor and McQuillan (2014) who note that placement disruptions are greater amongst adolescents.

The participants in this study described their additional support and training needs, which they believe is necessary to promote their socio-emotional wellbeing. Research indicates that continuous training throughout the fostering experience is vital for the ongoing development of foster parents' knowledge and skills (Gouveia et al., 2021). In particular, this study noted the need for trauma related training. The importance of such training is maintained by Lotty et al. (2021) who assert that foster carers need to be adequately trained to provide care for children who have been exposed to trauma and demonstrate trauma related behaviours.

Many of the difficulties experienced by foster parents are well documented in the literature (Greiner et al., 2015). Overall, the results of this study have been shown to not only support, but also extend upon existing literature by demonstrating that the findings of this literature are congruent within the context of community care schemes where research is currently limited. In addition, the findings also add to an understanding of how foster mothers perceive their role, and the ways in which this constructs their identities.

Implications of the study

The findings of the study have multiple implications, not only within the CFC scheme in which the study was conducted, but also within the broader context, and may be valuable to Cluster Foster Care schemes, childcare practitioners, and other professionals, who can work together in the provision of foster training and support programmes. Strengthening these programmes could aid in mitigating placement disruptions which may ultimately influence child outcomes. Foster parents, and the children they care for, should be provided with necessary emotional and psychological support through the provision of professional counselling services, which may aid in mitigating the risk of placement breakdown. The findings also highlighted that foster mothers rely on each other for emotional support, and parenting advice. Thus, should funding be limited, it is recommended that foster parents engage in weekly support groups, where they will be able to receive ongoing support from each other. Foster mothers may be encouraged by social workers to participate in a counselling or group work course, that can better equip them for the running of peer support groups, while psychologists and social workers are consulted for more complex issues. In addition, it is also recommended that foster parents be provided with formal supervision sessions, where they may be provided with the necessary parenting guidance and support. The findings also suggest that trainings programmes aid in upskilling foster parents to navigate child trauma, and the challenges that may arise within the home as a result.

Concluding comments

While this was elucidated when describing the purpose of the study to potential participants, a possible limitation of the study is that the researchers might have been linked

with the managerial team within the Cluster Foster Care (CFC) scheme. As a result, foster parents may have been less willing to discuss certain difficulties and issues. Additionally, although a confidentiality agreement was signed by the translator, the use of a translator may have had implications for participants' willingness to discuss their experiences. However, it may have been beneficial that the translator was a foster mother herself external to the organisation, as it may have provided the participants with a sense of being understood.

Multiple research avenues may arise based on the results of this research. A mixed-methods study exploring the correlation between foster parents' adverse experiences and their emotional wellbeing, specifically looking at burnout, compassion satisfaction and fatigue would be useful. While this study gained some insight into the coping strategies that are utilised by foster parents, more in-depth research is needed in this area. Further research may also be conducted into the development, implementation, and efficacy of foster parent training programmes.

The rising numbers of orphaned and vulnerable children in countries such as South Africa, have resulted in an increased need for alternative care. CFC schemes provide children with a family and community-based support system (Du Toit et al., 2016). However, it is vital that the wellbeing of foster parents is supported, thus mitigating risk of placement breakdown, and ensuring that children grow up in nurturing homes, with responsive and consistent caregivers.

Acknowledgement

The management and staff of the CFC scheme are thanked for their willingness to participate in the study.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Sheree Adams holds a Masters degree and is an educational psychologist. She has experience in community work.

Zaytoon Amod (PhD, Associate Professor) is a clinical and educational psychologist who currently teaches and provides clinical as well as research supervision in the Department of Psychology at the University of the Witwatersrand. Her research interests include mental health promotion and psycho-educational assessment and intervention.

ORCID

Zaytoon Amod  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0030-3637>

References

- Adeboye, T. K., das Guerreiro, M. D., & Höjer, I. (2019). Unveiling the experiences of young people in foster care: Perspectives from Portugal and Nigeria. *International Social Work*, 62(1), 433–446. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020872817731147>

- African Union. (1990). *African charter on the rights and welfare of the child*. https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/36804-treaty-african_charter_on_rights_welfare_of_the_child.pdf
- Bagdonaite-Stelmokiene, R., & Zydziunaite, V. (2020). "I became a different person": personal change of Lithuanian foster parents through informal learning. *Qualitative Research in Education*, 9(1), 65–94. <https://doi.org/10.17583/qre.2020.4596>
- Bat Or, M., & Zusman-Bloch, R. (2022). Subjective experiences of at-risk children living in a foster-care village who participated in an open studio. *Children (Basel)*, 9(8), 1218. <https://doi.org/10.3390/children9081218>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2012). Chapter 4: Thematic analysis. In H. Cooper, P. Camic, K. Sher, A. T. Panter, D. Long, & D. Rindskopf (Eds.), *APA handbook of research methods in psychology* (pp. 57–66). American Psychological Association.
- Cooley, M. E., Thompson, H. M., & Newell, E. (2019). Examining the influence of social support on the relationship between child behavior problems and foster parent satisfaction and challenges. *Child & Youth Care Forum*, 48(3), 289–303. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10566-018-9478-6>
- Cooley, M. E., Thompson, H. M., & Wojciak, A. S. (2017). Risk, resilience and complexity: Experiences of foster parents. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 76(1), 35–41. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2017.02.030>
- Daniel, E. (2011). Gentle iron will: Foster parents' perspectives. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 33(6), 910–917.
- Du Toit, W., van der Westhuizen, M., & Alpaslan, N. (2016). Operationalising Cluster Foster Care schemes as an alternative form of care. *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 52(3), 390–413. <https://doi.org/10.15270/52-2-516>
- Etikan, I., Musa, S. A., & Alkassim, R. S. (2016). Compasion of convenience and purposive sampling. *American Journal of Theoretical and Applied Statistics*, 5(1), 1–4. <https://doi.org/10.11648/j.ajtas.20160501.11>
- Gallinetti, J., & Sloth-Nielsen, J. (2014). Cluster foster care: A panacea for the care of children in the era of HIV/AIDS or an MCQ? *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 46(4), 485–495. <https://doi.org/10.15270/46-4-154>
- Goemans, M., Van Breda, A. D., & Kessi, S. (2021). Experiences of young people preparing to transition out of Cluster Foster Care in South Africa. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 38(5), 227–237. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10560-020-00704-1>
- Gouveia, L., Magalhães, E., & Pinto, V. S. (2021). Foster families: A systematic review of intention and retention factors. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 30(1), 2766–2781. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-021-02051-w>
- Greiner, M. V., Ross, J., Brown, C. M., Beal, S. J., & Sherman, S. N. (2015). Foster caregivers' perspectives on the medical challenges of children placed in their care: Implications for pediatricians caring for children in foster care. *Clinical Pediatrics*, 54(9), 853–861. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0009922814563925>
- Hall, K. (2022). *Demography of South Africa's children*. Children Count.
- Hannah, B., & Woolgar, M. (2018). Secondary trauma and compassion fatigue in foster carers. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 23(4), 629–643. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359104518778327>
- Harding, L., Murray, K., Shakespeare-Finch, J., & Frey, R. (2020). The wellbeing of foster and Kin Carers: A comparative study. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 108(1), 104566. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2019.104566>
- Hiller, R. M., Fraser, A., Denne, M., Bauer, A., & Halligan, S. L. (2023). The development of young peoples' internalising and externalising difficulties over the first three-years in the public care system. *Child Maltreatment*, 28(1), 141–151. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10775595211070765>
- Hong, Y., Chi, P., Li, X., Zhao, G., Zhao, J., Stanton, B., & Li, L. (2015). Community-based family-style group homes for children orphaned by AIDS in rural China: An ethnographic investigation. *Health Policy and Planning*, 30(7), 928–937. <https://doi.org/10.1093/heapol/czu093>

- Hryshchenko, S., & Buzhina, I. (2022). Organisational and pedagogical forms of social care for orphans in China and Ukraine. *Comparative Professional Pedagogy*, 12(1), 7–14. [https://doi.org/10.31891/2308-4081/2022-12\(1\)-1](https://doi.org/10.31891/2308-4081/2022-12(1)-1)
- Ismail, R., & Putri, H. (2022). A foster mother can be a “biological mother” in raising neglected children by applying family based-care in Yayasan SOS children’s village, Indonesia. *JPPUMA Jurnal Ilmu Pemerintahan dan Sosial Politik Universitas Medan Area*, 10(1), 57–70. <https://doi.org/10.31289/jppuma.v10i1.6711>
- Jacobsen, H., Bergsund, H. B., Wentzel-Larsen, T., Smith, L., & Moe, V. (2020). Foster children are at risk for developing problems in social-emotional functioning: A follow-up study at 8 years of age. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 108(1), 104603. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2019.104603>
- Kaasbøll, J., Lassemo, E., Paulsen, V., Melby, L., & Osborg, S. O. (2019). Foster parents’ needs, perceptions and satisfaction with foster parent training: A systematic literature review. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 101(1), 33–41. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2019.03.041>
- Kang’ethe, S. M., & Nyasha, K. (2014). Pitting non-relative Cluster Foster Care placements against the best interests of the child. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, 5(14), 554–559. <https://doi.org/10.5901/mjss.2014.v5n14p554>
- Lassi, Z. S., Mahmud, S., Syed, E. U., & Janjua, N. Z. (2011). Behavioral problems among children living in orphanage facilities of Karachi, Pakistan: Comparison of children in an SOS village with those in conventional orphanages. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 46(8), 787–796. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00127-010-0248-5>
- Leathers, S. J., Spielfogel, J. E., Geiger, J., Barnett, J., & Vande Voort, B. L. (2019). Placement disruption in foster care: Children’s behavior, foster parent support, and parenting experiences. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 91(1), 147–159. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2019.03.012>
- Lietz, C. A., Julien-Chinn, F. J., Geiger, J. M., & Hayes Piel, M. (2016). Cultivating resilience in families who foster: Understanding how families cope and adapt over time. *Family Process*, 55(4), 660–672. <https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12239>
- Lohaus, A., Chodura, S., Möller, C., Symanzik, T., Ehrenberg, D., Job, A. K., Reindl, V., Konrad, K., & Heinrichs, N. (2017). Children’s mental health problems and their relation to parental stress in foster mothers and fathers. *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health*, 11(43), 43. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13034-017-0180-5>
- Lotty, M., Bantry-White, E., & Dunn-Galvin, A. (2021). A qualitative study in Ireland: Foster carers and practitioners perspectives on developing a trauma-informed care psychoeducation programme. *Child Care in Practice*, 30(2)(2), 95–111. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13575279.2021.1925632>
- Mancinelli, E., Dell’Arciprete, G., & Salcuni, S. (2021). A systematic review on foster parents’ psychological adjustment and parenting style—An evaluation of foster parents and foster children variables. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(1), 10916. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph182010916>
- Pope, N. D., Ratliff, S., Moody, S., Benner, K., & “Jay” Miller, J. (2022). Peer support for new foster parents: A case study of the Kentucky foster parent mentoring program. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 133, 106358. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2021.106358>
- Ray, S. L., Wong, C., White, D., & Heaslip, K. (2013). Compassion satisfaction, compassion fatigue, work life conditions, and burnout among frontline mental health care professionals. *Traumatology*, 19(4), 255–267. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1534765612471144>
- Republic of South Africa. (2005). *Children’s Act, no 38 of 2005*. Government Printers: Government Gazette.
- Republic of South Africa. (2011). *Over three million children orphaned in SA*. South African Government News Agency. <https://www.sanews.gov.za/south-africa/over-three-million-children-orphaned-sa>
- Rogowska, A. M., Zmaczyńska-Witek, B., Łatka, I., & Kardasz, Z. (2022). Emotional intelligence and coping with stress in foster parents. *Family Forum*, 11(1), 165–190. <https://doi.org/10.25167/FF/4504>

- Rork, K. E., & McNeil, C. B. (2011). Evaluation of foster parent training programs: A critical review. *Child & Family Behavior Therapy*, 33(2), 139–170. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07317107.2011.571142>
- Salloum, A., Kondrat, D. C., Johnco, C., & Olson, K. (2015). The role of self-care on compassion satisfaction, burnout and secondary trauma among child welfare workers. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 49(1), 54–61. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2014.12.023>
- Sharda, E. (2022). Parenting stress and well-being among foster parents: The moderating effect of social support. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 39(5), 547–559. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10560-022-00836-6>
- Sprecher, E. A., Tuitt, I., Hill, D., Midgley, N., & Slead, M. (2021). No typical care story: How do care-experienced young people and foster carers understand fostering relationships? *Adoption & Fostering*, 45(3), 248–264. <https://doi.org/10.1177/03085759211037156>
- Sunder, A. J., Lindberg, E., Nilsson, C., & Palmér, L. (2019). Qualitative thematic analysis based on descriptive phenomenology. *Nursing Open*, 6(3), 733–739. <https://doi.org/10.1002/nop2.275>
- Taylor, B. J., & McQuillan, K. (2014). Perspectives of foster parents and social workers on foster placement disruption. *Child Care in Practice*, 20(2), 232–249.
- United Nations. (1989). *Convention on the right of the child*. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>
- van der Walt, G. (2018). Alternative care in South Africa. *Obiter*, 39(3), 615–651. <https://doi.org/10.17159/obiter.v39i3.11327>
- Verheyden, C., Van Holden, F., West, D., & Vanderfaeillie, J. (2020). Secondary traumatic stress, burnout and compassion satisfaction among Flemish foster care workers during the COVID-19 lockdown. *Developmental Child Welfare*, 2(4), 227–243. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2516103220987227>