

Science or Discretion? Factors that Influence Social Workers' Decision-making in Rendering Foster Care Services

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Abstract

Scientific decision-making or discretion: what are the factors that influence the decision-making processes of social workers rendering foster care services? Social workers are required daily to decide whether a child at risk of harm and neglect should be moved to alternate care. A well-considered decision can result in positive outcomes, but a poorly conceived decision can have dire consequences for the child, biological parent and foster parents. This article is based on a study that investigated the factors that influence the decision-making processes of social workers rendering foster care services. The study employed a qualitative approach and a collective case study design. The population of the study was social workers and their supervisors rendering foster care services to government and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Gauteng, South Africa. Purposive sampling and triangulation of data collection methods were used, namely, case file analysis and semi-structured interviews with social workers and supervisors. Both deductive and inductive data analysis approaches were adopted. Ethical clearance was obtained for the study, and before the commencement of data collection, participants were fully briefed about the study, and informed consent was obtained. Trustworthiness was addressed during the study. The findings on the factors influencing the decision-making process in the assessment phase, the placement phase, and the supervision phase will assist social workers in becoming more aware of factors that can consciously or unconsciously influence their decision-making. This will result in more uniform, transparent, and informed decision-making regarding the provision of foster care services.

Keywords: factors; decision-making process; social worker; foster care; foster child; foster parent



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Introduction

The decisions made by social workers rendering foster care services should be made explicitly based on professional knowledge and sound reasoning using robust assessment tools and empirical evidence (Taylor 2012; McCafferty, Duffy and Hayes 2021). However, despite the increasing pressure on social workers to be more transparent about their decision-making, it seems that they may have little conscious awareness of how and why they make decisions the way they do (Taylor 2012; Kirkman and Melrose 2014; Tupper, Broad, Emanuel, Hollingsworth, Hume, Larkin, Ter Meer and Sanders 2017).

An abundance of guiding tools for evidence-based empirical decision-making are available, such as a code of practice, a framework for assessing children in need of care, and a framework of national norms and standards for rendering foster care services (Brown 2014). In spite of decision-making tools being accessible, a study by Berrick, Peckover, Poso and Skivenes (2015) in several European countries found that social workers tend to make decisions on the care and protection of children based on their own individual standards.

In South Africa, the primary consideration of social workers in the placement of children in need of care is kinship foster care (Boning and Ferreira 2013:526). From April 1997 until November 2016, the number of children in foster care placements grew by 963.5%, with the largest growth being between 2004 and 2008, driven by the increased number of adult deaths due to HIV and AIDS (SASSA 2017). The sudden and large number of foster care placements affected the workload of social workers over subsequent years. Time and workload pressures make it extremely difficult for social workers to give each case the due professional attention it requires, and they come to rely on intuition for quick decision-making (Sibanda and Lombard 2015; Tupper et al. 2017).

The article aims to facilitate awareness of factors that can consciously or unconsciously influence social workers' decision-making in rendering foster care services and to contribute towards evidence-based empirical decision-making.

Literature Review

Social workers rendering foster care services are professionals who need to make difficult decisions daily in the best interest of children (Bruce 2013; McCafferty, Duffy and Hayes 2021). Child protection work is highly emotive as social workers investigate and work with families who are possibly abusive in an atmosphere filled with strong feelings, anger, anxiety, concern and fear (Beckett 2007). Even in these circumstances, social workers routinely make highly complex and highly challenging decisions (Kirkman and Melrose 2014). In the quest to improve social work practice, there is an increasing need to improve the nature, transparency and evidence that inform decision-making processes in social work.

Foster care services in South Africa are guided by legislation, namely the Children's Act 38 of 2005 and its subsequent amendments, regulations and guidelines for the effective management of foster care. In terms of the legislation, foster care in South Africa means the care of a child as described in terms of section 180 (1) of the Children's Act 38 of 2005. A foster child is seen as a child who has been placed in the care of a person who is not the parent or the guardian of the child as a result of a court order or being transferred into the care of that person. (South Africa 2006).

The guidelines for the effective management of foster care in South Africa (DSD 2009) divide foster care services into the assessment phase, placement phase, and supervision phase. The assessment phase is conducted in three stages, namely intake, prevention, early intervention, and investigation (DSD 2009). Each stage and phase of foster care services are characterised by several factors that define its respective decision-making process (DSD 2009). The role of the social worker in each of these stages and phases of foster care services is guided by professional practice.

Despite the guidelines and tools for effective decision-making, a study by Taylor (2012) in the United Kingdom (UK) found that the decisions of social workers working in foster care are influenced by several factors, such as personal attributes and the preferences of the social worker. These factors enabled them to develop their own individual ways of responding to moral and ethical issues, which shaped the assessment process.

In South Africa, the lack of supervision over foster care placements and the reliance on the High Court to extend foster care placement orders without social workers' supervision demonstrate the gap in the decision-making processes by social workers rendering foster care services (Department of Justice: Court Order 72513/2017). Social workers view responding to poverty as one of their main concerns and acknowledge that resource constraints are significant barriers to their ability to respond more effectively to children in need and protection (Font and Maguire-Jack 2016; Graham et al. 2015). The role of the supervising social workers includes providing information and guidance and reviewing the practical and emotional support needs of the carer. The social workers also check standards, respond to concerns, and ensure compliance with policies and procedures (Brown, Sebba and Luke 2014). They manage risks, ensure safety, review parenting plans, monitor the impact of the placement, respond to foster parents' concerns and assess the foster parents' relationship with the child (Brown et al. 2014).

A study by Kirkman and Melrose (2014) among the local authorities in the United Kingdom (UK) found that social workers routinely made highly complex and challenging decisions. They found that a range of behavioural factors complicated or reduced the efficiency of social workers' decision-making. Firstly, time and workload pressures increased the reliance of social workers on intuition to make decisions. Secondly, a range of behavioural biases affected social workers' ability to make objective judgements, such as confirmation bias, decision avoidance, and judging cases on their relative rather than their objective merits. Thirdly, the complexity of social

workers' decision-making increased further by the fact that many sequential decisions must be made over a single day, which engenders decision depletion or decision fatigue. Lastly, the information provided to social workers was scant and of low quality, resulting in them having to spend a lot of time and energy putting together a full picture of all the relevant information, leaving less time for analysis.

Other factors that influence the variability of the decision-making of social workers in foster care include the different tiers of government, political mandates, attitudes, theoretical knowledge, relational issues, material resources, and personal environments (Chateauneuf, Poirier and Page 2021). Previous studies show that it is not uncommon for social workers to rely mainly on their professional knowledge to influence their decision-making processes, irrespective of the complexity of the situations they handle.

Despite the development of empirical tools to guide the decisions of social workers, there continues to be tension between decisions based on intuition and decisions made scientifically based on empirical evidence (Epstein et al. 2015). There have been studies on the decision-making of officials at the South African Department of Home Affairs and medical personnel as frontline workers, but there have been no studies on social workers rendering foster care services in South Africa. Chateauneuf et al. (2021) confirm that the strategies and procedures underlying the decision to remove a child from his/her family for placement in foster care remain little studied. There is also a gap in the literature about the nature of the interaction between the social worker and the client and how this shapes the decisions they make (Kelly 2016).

One of the objectives of the study was to explore and describe the decision-making processes of social workers during the assessment, placement and supervision phases of foster care services. The research question that the study sought to answer was "What are the factors that influence the decision-making processes of social workers rendering foster care services?"

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework used in this study was the decision-making theories in social work. The three broad forms of decision-making theories are intuitive and analytical decision-making, and they are a mix of both (Hackett and Taylor 2014; O'Sullivan 2011). Intuitive judgements are rapid, automatic, and generally unconscious responses to events based on a wide range of prior knowledge and experience gained over a lifetime, as well as professional knowledge (Hackett and Taylor 2014; Tupper et al. 2017). Professional knowledge plays an important part in decision analysis in making judgements about decision outcomes (Hackett and Taylor 2014; Helm 2011; Taylor 2007). The analytical theory of decision-making focuses on the mathematical modelling of understanding how a rational person ought to make clinical decisions (O'Sullivan 2011; Taylor 2012). It is defined "as a step-by-step, conscious, logical defensible process based on evidence" (Hammond 1996:60). In the mixed theory of decision-

making, intuition and analytical decision-making are used in a complimentary and interdependent manner. Both the analytical and intuitive styles of reasoning have a part to play in social work decisions. When making decisions with clients or other professionals, some degree of analysis is necessary to be explicit about the choices made (O'Sullivan 2011).

Research Methodology

The approach was qualitative, using the collective case study design since the data was contextual in nature (Hunziker and Blankenagel 2021). In this collective case study, cases at multiple sites were used because it was important to understand the factors that influenced the decision-making of social workers rendering foster care services at multiple sites (districts) where different contexts prevail. The unit of analysis was the decision-making processes of social workers and supervisors rendering foster care services in government and NGOs, respectively, in all five districts, namely Tshwane, West Rand, Johannesburg, Sedibeng and Ekurhuleni in Gauteng Province, South Africa. Administrative data on foster care placements showed Gauteng to have the second highest number of children in foster care, and being familiar with the researcher, it was the location of choice for the study.

The researcher used purposive sampling, a method of non-probability sampling, to obtain an in-depth understanding of participants' perspectives within their natural settings (Halkias, Neubert, Thurman and Harkiolakis 2022). Purposive sampling was used to ensure the selection of participants with at least one or more years of experience in rendering foster care services and those with the largest foster care caseloads to ensure a reasonable depth of knowledge and experience in decision-making. Seven social workers and five supervisors from the Gauteng Provincial Department of Social Development and eight social workers and six supervisors from NGOs participated in the study. The sample was expanded until data saturation was achieved. A case file, selected purposefully by each participating social worker and supervisor, was analysed to shed light on the factors influencing the decision-making processes, after which interviews were conducted with the relevant social worker and the supervisor.

The University of South Africa's Social Work Research Ethics Committee (SWREC) provided ethical approval of the study (2019- SWREC 05404371) which was confirmed by the College Higher Degree Office of the College of Human Sciences. The data collection instruments were piloted twice at a government office and an NGO. Permission was obtained from the Department of Social Development provincial office, the district office, and the local office, where the data collection took place. The same process was followed with the NGOs. Consent had to be obtained from the foster parent, parent and child or children for access to the file and information. Confidentiality and protection of information assurance were given to all participants. A triangulation of data collection methods and sources was undertaken to get a holistic understanding of the phenomenon to enhance credibility (Adams, Minton, Hightower and Blount 2022;

Yin 2018). Data sources were triangulated as data was collected from social workers and their supervisors from government and NGOs. Data collection methods were triangulated by using interviews, and case files were perused for evidence of decision-making tools and processes.

To ensure transferability, a comprehensive description of the research methodology, data collection and data analysis processes was documented in the study (Creswell and Poth 2018; Dillman and Blount 2021). In analysing the data, the researcher used inductive coding to obtain themes from the narratives (Adams et al. 2022). An independent coder was contracted to ensure the trustworthiness of the data analysis. The researchers acknowledged the limitations inherent in the study. As a qualitative collective case study, the transferability of the study was limited to its natural context, and therefore, the findings could potentially pertain to similar contexts as indicated in the five districts in Gauteng province in South Africa.

Findings

The participants were asked what factors influenced their decision-making processes during each stage of the assessment phase, placement and supervision phases of foster care services. Three themes were identified according to the phases of intervention during foster care services.

Theme 1: Factors Influencing the Decision-making Processes of Social Workers during the Assessment Phase of Foster Care Services

Although the assessment phase is conducted in three stages, namely intake, prevention, and early intervention, the findings of all three stages will be incorporated into the assessment phase.

Sub-theme 1.1: The Referring Source, Urgency or Severity of Case

In this study, the referring source is the person or institution that referred the client.

The social worker referred the case directly to me. She WhatsApped all the information to me because I was not in my office and when I looked at the WhatsApp, I realised it was severe enough to warrant immediate action. So that is how this intake worked ... (David)

Given our limited resources, we must prioritise which cases will get our immediate response, and who refers the case influences our decisions and processes. (Tebogo)

In both the government and the NGOs, the referring source influenced the turnaround times for interventions by the social worker. Literature confirms that a case referred by the school is more likely to receive immediate attention, followed by a referral from a hospital and another social worker within the same or another organisation (Kirkman and Melrose 2014; Tupper et al. 2017). When schools and hospitals reported cases of

neglect, abuse and abandonment, the matter received an immediate response (Tupper et al. 2017).

Sub-theme 1.2: Pre-assessment of the Financial Situation of the Prospective Family

During the intake phase, social workers assess the income and expenses of the potential parent to determine the lack of visible means of support.

We look at the financial situation of the prospective foster mother and determine their need for financial support and then we place the child in foster care with her. (Boitumelo)

The most important factor during intake is to assess the lack of visible means of support for a child. If a child is abandoned and has no means of support, then we must act immediately. (Tebogo)

The above narratives emphasise that the financial situation of the potential foster parents is key when a decision on whether to place a child in foster care or not is made. According to Zeijlmans et al. (2018), the claim to financial impoverishment seems to work in favour of related placements or relatives of children to access the Foster Child Grant.

Sub-theme 1.3: Parents' Unwillingness to Cooperate

One of the main factors influencing social workers' decisions to remove children to temporary safe care (TSC) as prevention is the unwillingness of parents to cooperate with social workers on behavioural change.

The removal of the child is dependent on the co-operation and willingness of the parents to improve their situation. It is very difficult to do preventive services with the family and at the same time, protect the child. When the case comes to us, it is past the stage of preventive services. (Boitumelo)

The main factor that influences decisions is the co-operation or lack of co-operation from both parents and the child. In this case, the child cooperated well, but the father didn't, so we had to move the child to a place of safety. (Tebogo)

Delgado, Pinto, Carvalho and Gilligan (2019) explain this unwillingness by stating that the separation of children from their parents is a painful process, which results in a lot of hostility, anger and anguish, and unless these emotions are worked through, there will be strong resistance to the removal of children from parental care.

Sub-theme 1.4: Poverty and Illness

Poverty and the high rates of maternal deaths emerged as factors that influence social workers' decisions to place children in foster care with relatives. Most of the

applications for foster care are for maternal orphans whose fathers are deceased or allegedly unknown.

It is poverty and the need or dire situation that the family experiences. Some clients are very emotional, and you tend to put more effort into assisting them. The community where the client lives is known to be poor. (Ida)

There are external factors that influence the demand for foster care. The death rate in this country seems to be high, and that has an influence on the demand for foster care. ... There are also high levels of poverty in the urban, peri-urban and informal settlements ... (Tebogo)

Keddell (2014, 925) is of the opinion that social workers become oversensitive to poverty in the community, especially when there is a lack of community resources to assist poor families.

Sub-theme 1.5: Interference from Politicians

Interference from politicians emerged as a factor that influenced the decision-making process of social workers, mainly in government.

... you have a father, the mother passed away, and the father is left with these children. The politicians want you to remove the child, and your experience says don't remove the child, rather do preventive services by supporting the father. But then the politicians force you to remove the child or children and place them in TSC. (Winnie)

Social workers complain that they are treated like "magicians" by politicians and must solve everyone's problems when they cannot and can only respond in terms of the resources that are available.

Then we have undue pressure from politicians, if there is any disaster or any issue in the community, we social workers are dispatched to go and address the problems. We don't have the solution to all people's problems. (Mike)

Literature confirms the influence of politicians on service delivery, promising citizens free services and unconditional access to the Foster Child Grant (Dhludhlu and Lombard 2017; Hall, Skelton and Sibanda 2016).

Sub-theme 1.6: Total Reliance on Information Given by the Clients

The decision-making process of the social worker during this stage was predominantly based on the information provided by the potential foster parent.

The paternal uncle reported that there are no maternal relatives alive, and thus, he could not get any information on the previous placement. Clients giving us the correct information is very important. Clients will come with only one set of documentation and that is of the mother. There is often no documentation for the father. (Gail).

In this case, the child was placed in temporary care and then in unrelated foster care. The main decisions are based on what the child says. If the child wants to live with an aunty, we must act accordingly.... (Rose)

If there is a willing foster parent and a willing child, the social worker proceeds with the placement.

We only focus on the foster parent and the child. If the foster parent is happy and the child is happy, we don't bother to get any additional information. (Mike)

Other authors found that total reliance on the information given by the clients occurs continuously throughout the foster care process (Munro 2008; Storhaug et al. 2018).

Sub-theme 1.7: Age Gap between the Foster Parent and the Child

In both the government and the NGOs, children were placed in the care of very old grandparents.

The main factor we encounter is that the foster parent is too old to care for the children in their care... (Mike)

We did explore placement of the two younger children with the grandmother, but she said she could not cope. The older child wanted to stay with the grandmother and her older sister and then we placed her with the grandmother. (Elda)

Hearle and Ruwanpura (2009) confirm this "burden of care" on older people. A recent study by Nkosi (2020) mentioned foster parents complaining about age-related ill-health, such as chronic conditions and knee and back deterioration, which made the care, control and discipline of foster children difficult.

Theme Two: Factors Influencing Decision-making Processes by Social Workers during the Placement Phase of Foster Care Services

The placement phase of foster care is also known as the statutory phase (DSD 2009).

Sub-theme 2.1: Willingness of Potential Foster Parent to Care for the Child

One of the primary factors that influence the decision of the social worker to place the child with the prospective foster parent is the willingness to care for the child, whether it is by choice or obligation, and to complete an affidavit to this effect.

The grandmother was the only relative willing to care for the child and our first option is to always place children with relatives before we consider unrelated placements. (Joyce)

The only factor that influences kinship placements is the willingness to care for the children because there are no options. Believe me, very often, the motive to care for the children is not always good, but they are willing to care for the children. (Unathi)

Zeijlmans et al. (2018) share their finding that pressure to make a decision, e.g. due to time or safety, has a negative impact on the matching process and content. A person willing to foster a child might be selected and not the person being the best match for the child.

Sub-theme 2.2: Suitability of the Potential Foster Parent and Prior Experience with Foster Care

In the case of related foster care applications, social workers seemed to use the willingness of the potential foster parent to foster the child as a decision-making criterion.

The grandmother was the only relative willing to care for the child and our first option is to always place children with relatives before we consider unrelated placements. (Joyce)

In the case of unrelated foster parents, social workers use their pool of pre-screened potential foster parents, enabling them to acquire experience with fostering and assess their suitability over the period of working with them.

In this unrelated (non-familial) foster placement, I knew the foster parent for four years now. This is not the first child I placed with her. She took other children into her care before. I considered her suitable for this placement because she has a big house, it is clean and neat, and she has a love for children. She has the well-being of the child at heart. (Boitumelo)

Decision-making in the child protection system is influenced by multiple factors: agency and geographic contexts, caseworker attributes, and families' unique circumstances (Font and Maguire-Jack 2015). These factors underlie the prescripts of the Children's Act 38 of 2005 regarding the best interest of the child principle. These factors, tools and resources (for example, the existence of a pool of pre-screened potential foster parents) influence the decision-making of social workers in the placement phase.

Sub-theme 2.3: Different Interpretations of the Law and Court Procedures

In the South African context, the presiding officer (Commissioner) of the court makes the final decisions in the form of a court order during the placement stage. However, in some instances, where there are different presiding officers in the different placement phases, there might not be agreement on the interpretation of a section of the Children's Act, 38 of 2005, which might impact the further placement of the child.

Then you get to court, you don't find the old magistrate, and another magistrate presides over the matter, and they don't understand why this child must be removed and starts the whole proceedings over requiring more evidence. (Pamela)

One magistrate is now requiring a mother link, and others don't. If one of the parents is dead and the father is alive and is unemployed, some magistrates are reluctant to do the placement, others consider placement. (Rose)

Similar findings on the variation in the interpretation of the Children's Act between social workers and presiding officers were found in other studies made by Boning and Ferreira (2012) and Sibanda and Lombard (2015).

Theme Three: Factors Influencing Decision-making by Social Workers during the Supervision Phase of Foster Care Services

Supervision includes monitoring the well-being and the needs of the child, as well as enhancing and supporting the foster family, which are also key activities of the social worker during the supervision phase (Brown, Sebba and Luke 2014).

Sub-theme 3.1. Non-disclosure of Information by Relatives

Participating social workers rendering supervision services discovered that foster parents were not truthful and did not disclose full information about the child's biological parents or information about the child's assets and income from the parent's pension funds during the intake and the investigation stages of foster care.

The non-disclosure of information about a living parent, non-disclosure of assets and inheritances ... There is a tendency to withhold information by the family on inheritances and assets of the foster children. (Ida)

The non-disclosure of information, especially about the presence of the children's fathers, often results in the foster care placement being terminated.

We find when you do the investigations, the child and foster parent will tell you the whereabouts of the father are unknown, but during supervision, when you do one-on-ones with the child, the child will tell you I know my father, then we terminate the placement and encourage the family to apply for the Child Support Grant. (Yolande)

A study by Mapane and Ross (2017) confirmed that adolescents in foster care did not know their fathers or were unaware of their fathers' whereabouts.

Sub-theme 3.2 Lack of Co-operation from Foster Parents

One of the factors that militate against social workers applying for extending court orders expeditiously is the lack of co-operation from foster parents. Once the foster parents obtain the Foster Child Grant, they do not maintain contact with the social workers. In some cases, the foster parent will re-establish contact with the social worker just before the expiry of the court order, leaving the social worker with very little time to comply with the administrative requirements and the court submission deadlines.

We have a lot of foster parents relocating to another province without informing the social worker. Some foster parents don't respond to calling notes and only come when the order is lapsing, and the magistrates are not entertaining those cases. (Rose)

Some of the foster parents are not cooperative... One of the reasons that Foster Child Grants lapse, you go to the foster home around 2 pm, the foster child will tell you that the foster parent is at work. You try to contact the foster parent and there is no response. Finally, you lose patience and tell the foster parent now we need to talk. (Yolande)

The above narratives confirm that uncooperative foster parents negatively affect the statutory processes and the viability of the placement. Mmolokoe (2017) contended that many foster parents seem only to focus on the receipt of the foster care grant, don't attend foster parents' meetings not adhere to social work appointments only when the placement lapses and the grant is suspended.

Sub-theme 3.3 Social Workers' Contact with Foster Children

Social workers do not maintain regular contact with foster parents and foster children.

Social workers are not managing their caseload. Their planning is very poor. Social workers only respond when a client comes in with a problem, and if they don't, then they lose contact with the foster parent and child. (Rose)

Some presiding officers do not trust social workers. They say they know that social workers do not have regular contact with the child and foster. (Queen)

Similar findings were mentioned by Schiller (2015) and Mampane and Ross (2017), where foster parents and children had never seen their social workers.

Discussion

In social work as a profession and foster care services specifically, there has been an expanding interest in introducing more scientific decision-making processes and minimising errors (Mattison 2000; Wulczyn, Daro, Fluke, Feldman, Glodek and Lifanda 2020). This study focused on factors influencing the decision-making process of social workers during all the phases of foster care services.

The assessment phase in foster care services is seen as the most critical phase that determines the best interest of the child (Brown 2014; DSD 2009). The factors found to influence social workers' decision-making processes in the assessment phase (Theme 1) included the referring source, urgency or severity of the case, the financial circumstances of the potential foster parent, corporation by parents, poverty, interference from politicians and insufficient information and assessment at intake. Storhaug et al. (2018) refer to "emergency placements" triggered by a crisis event or when a challenging situation could explain social workers' urgent responses when a doctor or hospital refers, or a parent is under threat. According to Dhludhlu and

Lombard (2017) and Hall et al. (2016), social workers can be overly influenced by poverty (due to the grant linked to foster care) or political pressure. These factors demonstrate that social workers tend to be reactionary in their responses to assessing a child in need of care. Whilst there was evidence of assessment tools to determine risk and the best interest of the child, decision-making based on professional knowledge also seemed to be dominant, indicating both elements of analytic and intuitive decision-making styles.

The influencing factors identified during the placement phase of the study (Theme 2) were the willingness of the prospective foster parent to care for the child, the suitability of the potential foster parent, and prior experience with foster care, as well as different interpretations of the law and court procedures. Zeijlmans et al. (2018) contend that some foster parents agree by choice, others by obligation. Decision-making in foster care is influenced by agency and geographic contexts, caseworker attributes, and families' unique circumstances (Font and Maguire-Jack 2015). A suitable match between the foster family and the foster child is associated with better outcomes with respect to child development (Zeijlmans et al. 2018). The researchers noted from the study that pressure to make a placement decision, e.g. due to time or urgency, has a negative impact on the matching process. A person willing to foster a child might be selected and not the person being the best match for the child. Agency policy on having a pool of selected foster parents or using assessment tools has a strong influence on the quality of placement decisions made. There seems to be a mix of professional intuition and a lower degree of analytical decision-making that emerged from the findings during the placement phase.

The last phase of foster care services (Theme 3), the supervision phase, is often erroneously seen as less important and is neglected by social work supervisors. The study indicated that the decision-making processes of social workers were influenced by several factors, namely the non-disclosure of information by relatives or the foster parents about the whereabouts of the biological fathers and mothers of the children, the lack of co-operation from the foster parents and a lack of contact between the social worker and foster children. The poor working conditions of social workers, high workloads, poor salaries, lack of tools and systems for innovative practice, and a lack of transport for fieldwork result in social workers not being able or motivated to perform their duties effectively (Clarke 2020; Landeros and Watson-Nunez 2022). The high staff turnover due to poor working conditions contributes to the discontinuity in services and loss of contact with foster families (Clarke 2020; Mampane and Ross 2017). It was clear to the researchers that once the foster parents obtained the Foster Child Grant, they were reluctant to maintain contact with their social workers, which reflected an uncooperative relationship that existed. The inability to contact the foster parent or render services to the foster child would result in the inability to extend the placement or work toward reunification. A lack of contact with the foster family led to intuitive or mixed styles of decision-making.

Recommendations

The following recommendations can be made based on the study:

Practice

- Social workers rendering foster care services should be made aware of factors influencing their decision-making processes during the different phases of foster care during their supervision and training. Reflection on factors influencing decision-making in the various phases of service delivery should be incorporated into supervision sessions.
- Social workers should be trained in the use of both existing and newly developed decision-making tools, e.g. a matching tool for placing children in foster care and a framework for monitoring the development of children during supervision in foster care.
- The foster care system and services in South Africa should be modernised with an automated self-screening and information disclosure process that can be externally verified with other government information systems to reduce paper-intensive manual data collection processes. This would reduce the workload of social workers and enable them to render more evidence-based assessments and services.
- An automated child and foster parent matching system could be implemented to match the attributes of the child with a database of potential foster parents, which could contribute to a more organised system.
- Technology could be used to maintain contact with foster children and parents, e.g. use of WhatsApp and Facebook.

Further Research

- It is recommended that further research be undertaken on the impact of the factors identified in this study on the foster child, foster parent, and biological parent of the child.
- It is also recommended that research be undertaken to determine how technology can be used to make foster care services more effective in verifying the information of biological parents, foster parents, and their lineage to the child in need of care.

Conclusion

Foster care services are the largest child protection programme in South Africa. This article served to analyse the factors that influence the decision-making processes of social workers rendering foster care services from the very inception of contact to the discharge of the child from care. If social workers are consciously aware of why they make the decisions they do, decisions in each phase of foster care service delivery will be more uniform, transparent and informed; thus, based more on scientific decision-making and less on discretion, contributing to social work being the trusted profession it is meant to be.

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