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The impact of excessive workload on Social Workers effectiveness in foster care interventions at Bojanala district, South Africa

Keoagile A MMOLOKOE

ABSTRACT

Foster care is a statutory service that is regulated in terms of the Children's Act no 38 of 2005 as amended. Social workers have the duty to render effective foster care interventions to children. The challenge is that social workers are carrying excessive workload which affects their effectiveness in rendering foster care intervention. This paper presents the findings from the study that was conducted to explore the effects of excessive workload on social workers interventions in foster care placement at Bojanala District in the North-West province. Phenomenological design was used to allow social workers to share their experiences relating to the effects of excessive workload. The researcher interviewed ten social workers as key informants using semi-structured interviews. The data generated were analysed using thematic analysis. Findings revealed that due to excessive workload social workers are unable to implement the Children's Act no 38 of 2005 as amended adequately during interventions. The challenges they experience include the delay in finalization of new foster care placements, compromised quality in assessment report writing, poor record keeping, inadequate foster care supervision, delay in the review and extension of court orders. The researcher recommends that more social workers be employed to address excessive workload.

KEY TERMS: effectiveness, excessive, impact, intervention, foster care, social work, workload

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INTRODUCTION

Foster care is a formal arrangement whereby a competent authority places children in the domestic environment of a family other than the child's own that has been selected, qualified and approved for providing such care. It intends to meet the child's basic needs essential for their growth and development in terms of emotional, physical, and psychological wellbeing. South Africa provides kinship foster care by placing children in foster care of someone related to them and cluster foster care which means placing children with unrelated parents. Foster care has passed the test of time in SA, from the era where majority of children were orphaned after the passing of parents due to Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) to the era of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) global pandemic that claimed lives of many parents. It is still relevant in the current era where children are still getting orphaned due to various reasons like violent crime, gender-based violence, emerging cases of HIV/AIDS, child abandonment due to triple challenges of poverty, unemployment and inequalities leading to multiple social ills including unwanted pregnancy. At the end of March 2024 South African government recorded 306, 683 children who are receiving foster child grant in the social pension system. Social workers are expected to be effective in rendering of foster care interventions to these children and to those who are still to be recorded. Literature is showing that the numbers leave social workers having to handle excessive workload which impact negatively on their effectiveness when rendering foster care interventions. Studies have identified that social workers in the Bojanala district of the North -West province in SA are also dealing with excessive workload. Hence the study was then conducted at Bojanala district in South Africa to explore the impact of excessive workload on social worker's effectiveness in foster care interventions. The paper presents a background, methodology, ethical considerations, findings, discussions of findings, conclusion, recommendations and/ implications to social work.

BACKGROUND

Foster care uses a wide range of placements, ranging from short term to long term in providing a family life to children who cannot be cared for by their own parents (Udula- Koyana & Khanye, 2019). In terms of the Children's Act 38 of 2005 as amended, Children may be placed by court order in a foster home where a foster parent(s) can look after children, not more than six (6) in number. The Act also allows that foster parents can be extended family members or persons unknown to a child. They either come forward or get recruited by Child Welfare Organizations, undergo assessment process and structured orientation programme. In South Africa, children are often placed in foster care of their grandparents whose children have either died or abandoned their children (Udula- Koyana & Khanye, 2019). Foster care is fundamentally procedural and derived from legislative processes. It is guided and practiced with caution, prudence and discretion; hence it is imperative for social workers to be well informed regarding correct processes and procedures when implementing the provisions of the Children's Act no 38 of 2005 as amended. Social worker's responsibilities include conducting intake, assessment and investigation, presenting the report for finalization of children's court hearing, assisting the client with application for foster child grant, rendering foster care supervisory services and after care services (Department of Social Development, 2013).

Like other systems, foster care systems appear to have challenges that interfere with social workers' effectiveness. The word effectiveness is the synonym of efficacy which in the context of social work means the ability and extent to which social work intervention could be utilized (Dube, 2016). In the context of this paper, effectiveness means the extent to which social workers can utilize Children's Act regulatory guidelines and applicable theories in rendering foster care interventions. Social Work scholars have identified excessive workload as a great challenge that impact negatively on social workers' effectiveness in foster care placement (Dhludhlu and Lombard, 2017; Mokgapala and Rapholo, 2021; Mosala and Wilson, 2024; Mamukeyani, 2023). Study that was conducted at Bojanala district to evaluate social worker's intervention in foster care placement revealed that social workers in the district are unable to render quality foster care service, as they are battling with excessive workload, with one social worker handling over 100 cases (Mmolokoe, 2017). Mosala & Wilson (2024) support that managing over 100 cases-load is too much as social workers appears not to be coping, hence they bypass important processes. Kin Culture NPC (2024) indicates that social workers in the Western Cape are also confronted with the same challenge whereby one social worker in the province may be responsible for up to 150 cases at a time, which is not in line with the international standard ratio of 40-60 cases per social worker (Kin Culture NPC, 2024). Mokgapala and Rapholo (2021) attest that excessive workload carried by social workers is a national problem in South Africa.

Gudula-Koyana and Khanye (2019) point to the amendment of Section 158 of the Children's Act as a factor that adds more work for social workers since it allows the Children' Court to review foster care order every two years unless the court specifies a shorter period. Mosala and Wilson (2024) says excessive workload results from shortage of social workers, shortage of resources and burnout. According to Mamukeyani (2023) amongst others, excessive workload contributes to the accumulation of office backlogs, low working morale and burnout of social

workers. Dhludhlu and Lombard (2017) attests that it poses challenges for social workers in rendering developmental social services. According to Sibanda and Lombard (2015), excessive workload prevents social workers from implementing the statutory interventions guidelines sufficiently. After discovering that Bojanala district is also faced a challenge of what the literature portrays as excessive workload and the existing knowledge on the impact of excessive workload cannot be generalized, the question was: what is the impact of excessive workload on social worker's effectiveness at Bojanala district of the North- West province in South Africa? This paper is therefore aimed at presenting the findings.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted qualitative methodology to obtain descriptive data from the social workers. Phenomenological design used to allow social workers to share their experiences relating to the effects of social worker's excessive workload on foster care interventions at Bojanala, South Africa. Bush, Signh & Kooienga (2019) support that Phenomenological design sought to provide representation of people's experiences through an unbiased perspective. In this context the researcher utilized phenomenological design to describe the effects of social worker's excessive workload on foster care interventions at Bojanala, South Africa. The researcher targeted social workers at the Department of Social Development in the Bojanala District, North- West Province of South Africa. Purposeful sampling was used to select the participants in terms of the inclusion criteria. To be included in this study, social workers had to have five years' experience of practicing foster care. The researcher sampled ten social workers for Bojanala district. Two from each of five service points in the district to participate in the study.

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews guided by an interview schedule. Interviews took approximately one hour in duration. They were conducted at the participants' offices where it was most convenient and private for them. All the participants were interviewed in Setswana to consider their home language. Every interview was audio recorded after getting permission from participants and gate keepers. The generated data were analyzed using thematic analysis as guided by Braun and Clarke (2006,2021).

Ethical considerations

The study received ethical approval from North- West University Research Ethics Regulatory Committee (NWU-00121-14-A9) before its commencement. The North- West provincial Head Office of the Department of Social Development gave permission for access to social workers who participated in this study. Before enrolling the participants in the study, informed consent was obtained from the participants for interviews and to be audio recorded. Other ethical issues that were considered included avoidance of harm, ensuring voluntary participation, maintaining privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality throughout the entire research process.

FINDINGS

Following are findings of this study on effects of excessive social workers' workload on foster care interventions.

Delay in terms of finalizing new foster care applications.

According to section 155 (2) of the Children's Act no 38 of 2005 as amended, before the child is brought before the children's court, a designated social worker must investigate the matter and within 90 days compile a report in a prescribed manner on whether the child needs care and protection.

All participating social workers revealed that there is a delay in completing foster care applications because of excessive work- load.

Social worker # 9 said:

I have applications that were done in the past 14 months that are not finalized yet. This is because I have too many responsibilities. Over and above 198 foster care placements caseload, I am sitting with 27 new foster care applications that are awaiting investigations. On the other hand, I must render case work to other families including child neglect, substance abuse, and people living with disabilities, services to older people, awareness campaigns and attending workshops just to name few. It is therefore impossible for me to finalize new application as required by the Children's Act

The social worker # 10 said:

I am sitting with 28 foster care applications that I have never attended to and seven placements that I am still busy preparing for court. I also have caseload of 170 foster care placements that I should monitor.

Over and above foster care caseload, I have about 98 intakes of other clients (marital disputes, Social Relief of Distress, children with anti-social behavior, family conflicts, substance abuse, parenting plans) that I need to work on, and new cases are reported in the office daily. I render crisis interventions, also have a target for awareness campaigns; I supervise auxiliary social workers and expected to provide support in coordination of the program.

Social worker # 4 said:

I have applications that are over 2 years in the office, and I have not been able to finalize them due to high caseload.

Data shows that excessive workload also contributes to the delay in finalizing foster care placement, which impact negatively on children who are supposed to benefit from foster care placement.

Compromised quality in assessment/ investigation and report writing.

Comprehensive assessment provides a more in-depth and holistic view of the clients' situation, including that of their family (Department of Social Development, 2019). The Department of Social Development (2013) in the Information guide on the management of statutory services in terms of Children's Act 38 of 2005 as amended, states that after assessment and investigations the social worker is required to compile a professional report for children's court and the report should reflect the child's situation and should comply with the conditions in regulation 55 in terms of the Children's Act no 38 of 2005 as amended.

Social workers who participated in this study indicated that due to the pressure put on social workers to finalize many cases within short space of time, social workers do not manage to conduct assessments which then affect report writing.

Social worker #4 said:

We are becoming reliant more on office interviews than home visits, we just call clients to the office to collect information. With home visits I can only visit two families if the aim is to obtain comprehensive information, but with office appointments I am able to cover five applicants because I don't have to travel for sometimes to meet with clients. Office interviews limit us from having access to information that we could have access to during home visits. Some information needs to be observed such as home environment in making sure that we know where child lives. We also need to do school visits, talk to teachers, that also help in building collaboration to assist the child. Winter and Cree (2015) support that home-visit is an effective assessment method that should be done more than any other single activity for social workers to learn about risks, protection, and welfare of children.

Social worker # 3 said:

Most of the time we do not do assessment, we do cut and paste, whereby we use previously compiled reports and edit information there and there. In most cases, information in the report is not a reflection of the client's immediate situation.

Social worker 8# corroborated by saying:

I do cut and paste because I must reach the target. Those who do cut and paste mostly appear like they are compliant in the eyes of managers because they most often meet the set targets as compared to those who strive to do things by the law.

The above narratives show that excessive workload affect social workers' assessment and report writing negatively and that it has the potential to misinform relevant recommendations.

Poor Record keeping

Record-keeping is correct and continuous documentation that is seen as fundamental to effective and ethical social work and social service work practice. Social workers are required to keep records to account and maintain proof of services rendered to clients (Blake, 2010). Department of Social Development have tools that are available for social workers to record their interventions, and these includes reporter form, identifying details forms, external referral form and internal referral form, intake form, problem codes, risk levels, process note, assessment planning

and contracting form, intervention codes, process notes, evaluation, and termination report (Department of Social Development, 2019). The children's Act no 38 of 2005 regulated forms that must form part of social worker's records. In this study, participants indicated that record keeping is a challenge to most social workers.

Social worker # 1 said:

Sometimes I forget to complete all the necessary forms. At times I do complete them but end up forgetting to file them.

Social worker # 6 corroborated by saying:

Clients come in large numbers at the office; I always got to see more than 20 people presenting different problems including foster care. Because of pressure I would decide to just complete few things in the form such as the client's names and presented problem and hope that I will finalize everything afterwards. Then I end up forgetting to go back to intakes.

Social worker # 7 said:

Sometimes files get lost, and we end up having to open another file using copies of orders from the children's court. In those files there are no intakes, and process notes of previous engagements with clients.

Data shows that excessive caseload prevents social workers from maintaining proper records and that implies that social workers will find it difficult to account for service that they provided to foster parents and children in foster care.

Inadequate foster care supervision

Department of Social Development (2013) emphasizes that supervision must take place throughout process with the foster care beneficiaries to determine if the desired outcome is achieved.

The social worker # 3 said:

It is impossible to meet with foster parents and foster children individually in their respective foster homes due to other responsibilities that social workers are faced with. Group work makes it possible for social workers to supervise the placements in large numbers. The challenge remains with families that need individual attentions, which is mostly needed by all foster families because it is not easy for people to talk about everything in a group setup.

The social worker # 5 said:

At times we schedule appointments with foster parents for foster care supervision, the very same day when you must attend the appointments you get the mandate to deviate and attend other things like cases, meetings, or workshop. This happens more often and that makes clients lose trust in us.

The social worker # 9 said:

I do not have time for foster care supervision. I place and meet the foster family and children after two years when I conduct foster care review I have too many responsibilities

Social workers' narratives show that individual supervision with foster care beneficiaries is lacking, and that prevent children in foster care from accessing services that could have been responsive to their individualized needs.

Delay in the review and extension of court orders

During the review of court order foster care, placement can be extended in terms of section 159, 186, or section 176 of the children's Act no 38 of 2005 as amended.

Social worker # 4 indicated:

Many court orders lapse before they can be extended as we will be concentrating on other cases. This affects children because once court order lapses, payment of the foster child grant get suspended until valid extension order is submitted. This results in struggles experienced by foster parents as they try to provide for the basic needs of children in foster care.

Social worker # 8 said:

Some of the children in foster care end up accusing foster parent of misusing their grant. Others leave foster families, while others end up stealing.

Data shows that excessive workload delays the review and extension of court orders and that exposes children in foster care to poverty when the payment of foster child grant is getting discontinued.

DISCUSSIONS

Delay in finalization of new foster care placements

The study revealed that excessive workload contributes to the delay in the finalization of new foster care placements whereby foster application stay for over two years before they could be finalized. The study that was conducted at Capricorn District, Limpopo Province revealed that due to high workload, foster care applications could take up to a year or longer before they are processed and finalized at the Children's Court (Mokgapala and Rapholo, 2021). This surely leaves children in need of care and protection for a longer time. The participants in this study revealed that the delay is caused by the fact that they have additional responsibilities apart from foster care interventions, and that suggests that there is a need for additional human resources. The Children's Institute (2023) also supports that adequate human resources are critical to foster care interventions. Considering foster care to be area of specialization can also assist in enhancing social workers effectiveness.

Compromised quality in assessment and report writing

The participants have revealed that excessive workload affects quality of reports produced by social workers. The participants indicated that they do cut and paste as measure to push caseload. They further indicated that it is even difficult for them to conduct home visits for further assessment and investigations. Masha and Botha (2020) have discovered that social workers in South Africa are not doing adequate assessment. The study conducted at John Taolo Gaetsewe District in Northern Cape Province support that due to high workload, social workers end up rushing the interviews and that prevent them from obtaining the relevant information that can assist them to provide quality work (Mosala and Wilson, 2024). Kin Culture (2024) supports that heavy workload slows down the process of vetting foster care homes. This can lead to recommendation of wrong foster care placement. Mosala and Wilson (2024) corroborate that children end up placed in foster care with foster parents who are often unsuitable and are not able to create permanency for foster children due to factors such as incompatibility between the foster child and foster parent. Masha and Botha (2020) support that foster children often experience both physical neglect, physical abuse, emotional abuse and sexual abuse resulting from inadequate assessment by social workers.

Poor record keeping

Record keeping is revealed to be a challenge to social workers because of excessive workload. The study shows that social workers leave other documents not been fully completed in the file as they forget to complete, other documents are not included in the files as social workers forgot to file them after completion and others are not included as new files were created after the original one was lost. Mokgapala and Rapholo (2021) support that it is extremely difficult for social workers managing high caseloads to have all documents and attachments required in the file. Naicker (2021) identified a lack of foster care plans and multidisciplinary reports on files of foster care social workers. This can compromise the social workers' ability to account for the services they rendered to their clients. Social work supervision becomes critical in this regard, to quality assure that recording is done as expected. Electronic recording can also assist in preventing loss of files.

Inadequate foster care supervision

The participants said that excessive workload prevents social workers from conducting adequate foster care

supervision. Others conduct group sessions with foster parents on quarterly basis and do not get a chance to do home visits, while others do not conduct group sessions and do not do home visits until the time of review or extension of court orders. Gudula- Koyana & Khanye (2019) attests that inadequate supervision of foster placements is one of the challenges facing foster care system resulting from social workers' excessive workload. This makes it impossible for social workers to know about abuse of children in foster care when it starts as they may only get to know about it after two years when it is time to review the placement (Masha and Botha, 2021). Dhludhlu and Lombard (2017) have found that foster children are often neglected in foster families. Social auxiliary workers can play an important role in supervising foster care placements. Awareness is also needed in communities to encourage community members to report cases of child abuse in foster families.

Delay in the review and extension of court orders

The study has revealed that excessive workload contributes to the delay in the review and extension of foster care court orders. Mosha and Botha (2021) support that a huge foster care caseload has resulted in social workers being unable to obtain new court orders for children with expired court orders. Breen (2015) refers to this as foster care backlog, which is also discovered as a challenge in Limpopo province of South Africa (Mokgapala and Rapholo, 2021). Participants indicated that court orders lapse when social workers are busy with other cases. Shortage of social workers is identified as one of factors that contribute to the delay in the review and extension of court orders in Limpopo (Mamukeyani, 2023). Data from the research participants further shows that the delay in the review and extension of court orders makes it difficult for foster parents to provide for children in foster care with basic needs when the grant is suspended. Mosha and Botha (2020) attests that social workers being unable to obtain new court orders for children with expired orders presents the danger of several thousands of children having their foster child grant lapsed because of expired court orders.

CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATIONS AND/IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK

Based on the discussions above, it is evident that excessive workload prevents social workers from implementing guidelines of the Children's Act 38 of 2005 as amended when rendering foster care interventions. The study confirms that excessive workload results in the delay in finalization of new foster care applications, compromised quality in assessment and report writing, poor record keeping, lack of foster care supervision, delay in the review and extension of court orders. As indicated earlier, literature is pointing to shortage of social workers, shortage of resources and burnout as contributory factors to excessive workload. The study shows that in Bojanala district excessive workload results from shortage of social workers. The author is of the view that human resources cannot be separated from capital resources, hence it is important to take them into consideration.

The findings show that there is a need for more social workers to assist with foster care interventions. Employment of more social workers means that more social work supervisors and social auxiliary workers should also be employed to work with social workers. Capital resources will also need to be used by additional social workers, supervisors and social auxiliary workers. Social worker's ineffectiveness compromises the best interest of children in foster care and those whose applications are received but not attended to.

This study suggests the following recommendations to address the problem:

- Department of Social Development to employ more social workers, social work supervisors and social auxiliary workers to help in rendering foster care interventions.
- The department to also makes provision of resources and office accommodation as they are crucial in delivering foster care intervention.
- Department of Social Development to make application for accreditation of foster care as a specialized field of social work practice at the South African Council for Social Service Profession.

This study aimed to present findings on the impact of excessive workload on social worker's effectiveness at Bojanala district in South Africa. As promised in the introduction, this paper included background, methodology, ethics, presentation of findings, discussions, conclusions, recommendations and/ implication to Social Work. The recommendations are suggested, placing the best interest of children in the front.

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