

EXPLORING THE CAUSES OF THE RELATIONSHIP BREAKDOWN BETWEEN  
FOSTER PARENT(S) AND FOSTER CARE-LEAVER(S) AFTER TURNING 21

by

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## DECLARATION

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I declare that the work presented in this mini-dissertation titled "*Exploring the causes of the relationship breakdown between foster parent(s) and foster care-leaver(s) after turning 21*" is my own original work. All sources used have been acknowledged and referenced appropriately. I further declare that I submitted the dissertation to originality checking software and that it falls within the accepted requirements for originality. I further declare that I have not previously submitted this work, or part of it, for examination at Unisa for another qualification or at any other higher education institution.

**Signature:**



**Date: 2026.03.09**

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **EXPLORING THE CAUSES OF THE RELATIONSHIP BREAKDOWN BETWEEN FOSTER PARENT(S) AND FOSTER CARE-LEAVER(S) AFTER TURNING 21**

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The study aimed to gain a comprehensive understanding of the factors that lead to relationship breakdown between foster parents and foster care leavers as they exit the system at age 21. This study used a qualitative approach, employing exploratory, descriptive, and contextual designs. Sixteen purposively selected participants, eight foster care leavers and eight foster parents from Ekurhuleni Region, Gauteng, participated in the semi-structured face-to-face interviews. Thematic analysis was used to identify key themes, and ethical measures were followed to ensure participants' safety and wellbeing. The study found that relationship breakdowns in foster care are linked to factors such as emotional abuse, behavioural problems, financial difficulties, lack of discipline, limited support, substance abuse, and inadequate social services. Participants stressed the need for better preparation and continuous support during the transition to adulthood. The study recommends structured programmes, stronger aftercare services, policy changes to strengthen family relationships and improve outcomes for foster care leavers.

**KEY WORDS:** Exploring, causes, relationship breakdown, foster parent and foster care leaver

## **ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS**

ACRWC	African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child
BSW	Bachelor of Social Work
CYCC	Child and Youth Care Centre
DSD	Department of Social Development
EST	Ecological Systems Theory
ISDM	Integrated Service Delivery Model
NEET	Not in Education, Employment, or Training
NPO	Non-Profit Organisation
NYP	National Youth Policy
UNISA	University of South Africa
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights and Welfare of the Child
SASSA	South African Social Security Agency
USA	United States of America

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## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of this study is to explore the causes of the relationship breakdown between foster parents and the youths who exit the foster care system upon reaching the age of 21 and consequently cease to be eligible for support under the provisions of the Children's Act 38 of 2005, in accordance with section 175. In the following section, the brief background of this study will be discussed, followed by the problem statement, the significance of the study, the research question, the goal and objectives, assumptions, and the clarification of key concepts.

### **1.1 Background of the study**

Youth experience various challenges as they leave care, and these include a breakdown of the relationship with their foster parents. Häggman-Laitila, Saloekkilä, and Karki (2019:634) concur that the journey of young people who exit foster care upon reaching the age of 21 tends to be more complex compared to those raised by their birth families, as foster care leavers are often required to manage their lives independently at an earlier stage than that of their peers. It is said that stability within the foster care system is essential, as it provides children with histories of abuse with an opportunity to form secure attachment relationships and reduce the likelihood of developing behavioural and emotional difficulties during their development (Konijn, Colonesi, Kroneman, Lindauer & Stams, 2020:493); however, the researcher has observed that this is barely achieved in many foster care homes.

Despite the variations in the welfare systems across countries, young people leaving foster care consistently face less favourable outcomes than their peers across multiple domains, including education, employment, income, housing, and rates of teenage parenthood. They are more susceptible to mental health and behavioural challenges, struggle with substance abuse, and become involved in criminal activities (Häggman-Laitila et al., 2019:634). In the United States of America (USA), the foster care system serves over 400, 000 children and youth, and each year, more than 23 000 of these individuals exit care, often encountering significant challenges such as achieving academic success, entering the job market, achieving financial stability, and avoiding involvement with the criminal justice system (King, 2016:3).

A defining feature of foster care is that it does not grant foster parents full-parental authority; instead, the responsibility for the child's well-being is jointly held by the state and the foster parents, resulting in a shared model of parental responsibility (Van der Walt, 2018:625). The above is true, so unlike other types of care, such as adoption or guardianship, foster parents do not take full legal responsibility for the child or youth when he/she has reached the age of twenty-one, and the foster child grant has been terminated. It is also likely for a child in the foster care system to be moved between placements when a foster family is unable to adequately meet their needs.

Part of the challenges foster care leavers are faced with centres around mental health and identity formation. Young people with a history of foster care placement are more inclined to consistently perceive themselves as adults once they reach the majority status. This was found in the study conducted in the US, by Singer and Berzin (2015:79) who further reported that youths with foster care experience identify themselves as adults between the age of 18 and 26 more often than their non-foster peers, indicating that these young people may be deprived of the critical benefits associated with extended transition to adulthood; they often lack the time and support needed to develop the skills and knowledge essential for a successful and stable career.

Adverse childhood experiences and separation from their biological families have compelled them to assume adult responsibilities prematurely, whereas their peers outside the foster care system are generally able to mature at a more gradual pace (Häggman-Laitila et al., 2019:656). These care leavers experience hurried lonely journeys into their futures, commonly with little preparation, and having little if any help, or reliable supportive family relations; and in a context that is inadequately resourced (Hyde & Atkinson, 2019:47).

Colbridge, Hassett, and Sisley (2017:2) attest to the elevated prevalence of mental health challenges among care leavers and emphasise the significant role played by identity and self-esteem in influencing mental health outcomes, either as risk factors or as protective mechanisms. They also allude to the research that shows a widespread occurrence of emotional and behavioural difficulties observed in care leavers, which then raises an interest in understanding how identity formation influences the youth leaving care to thrive or not. In their study, they found that foster

care leavers, in their quest to construct their own identity, tend to become increasingly self-reliant as a way of avoiding rejection and abandonment, and that in turn leads to their isolation (Colbridge et al., 2017:10).

The researcher is interested in understanding the causes for rejection or abandonment for a foster care leaver and the reasons they feel isolated after leaving care. Colbridge et al. (2017:11) reported that youth leaving care end up opting to behave like chameleons, as the absence of secure familial bonds along with persistent instability and unpredictability, undermines their sense of identity and belonging. As young people transition into adulthood and renegotiate their place in the family, they may adapt their behaviour in different contexts to gain acceptance. This may create mistrust, emotional distance and confusion about who they are and over time, unresolved identity struggles may heighten feelings of rejection and contribute to relational breakdown. Thus, being in foster care and being faced with an abrupt separation from those whom they have regarded as family, and a place they have called home, for years might leave the youth leaving care with identity issues. Thomson, McPherson, and Marsland (2016:51) suggest that foster care placements are more susceptible to breaking down where foster care parents already have birth children.

While the plight of foster care leavers in Africa is comparable with that of their counterparts in global countries, as suggested by the information above, the circumstances faced by the African foster care leavers are worsened by high youth unemployment rates, high crime rates, poverty, and the lack of mandatory transitional preparation and post-care support services (Van Breda & Frimpong-Manso, 2020:3; Bond, 2018:79; Bond, 2020:32). Africa is known for its high unemployment rate which leads to poverty and many other social ills. Subsequently, the researcher sees the necessity for continued services by child protection organisations to foster care leavers, to ensure their successful transition to adulthood. Likewise, continuing the relationship with foster parents, as this will help the young adult to build good social networks and always have a cushion to fall back on when faced with challenges.

Van Breda and Frimpong-Manso (2020:3) allude limited capacity of the family system to offer non-formal guidance to care leavers as another factor that further worsens the plight of care leavers. In their study, Van Breda and Frimpong-Manso (2020:4) found

that social factors, such as preparation, safety net, and healthy relations, featured distinctly in the care leavers' narratives as factors that promote a successful transition. Consequently, many of the foster care leavers spoke of seeking to connect with their biological families, because they acknowledged the difficulties they face without support. In Ethiopia, care leavers found a need to connect with their birth families for identity and having a place of belonging (Van Breda & Frimpong-Manso, 2020:4).

A Ugandan proverb from the Baganda ethnic group states, 'You are always a child before your parents.' This reflects a cultural perspective in which transition to adulthood does not terminate the parental bond; rather, parental support and guidance are perceived as permanent, highlighting the enduring nature of familial roles within the community (Bukuluki, Kanya, Kasirye & Nabulya, 2020:35). This proverb still supports the notion of continued family relations for foster care leavers, so that they can experience the same benefits enjoyed by those who are raised by their biological parents.

Dickens and Marx (2020:69) indicate that many young people who had transitioned out of care were often not in employment or in education or training (NEET). This situation intensified their economic challenges and impaired their ability to continue with their studies or to afford an accommodation. Shaw, Steyn, and Simeon (2019:2) also concur with these authors that the youth leaving care face many difficulties related to poverty and unemployment, largely due to inadequate preparation for living independently after they leave foster care. The last year of secondary education is widely recognised as a demanding and stressful period, and for youth leaving care, the uncertainty surrounding the future further intensifies this stress as they approach their final examinations (Bond, 2020:31). These stressors could contribute to the negative outcomes in their education.

According to the Children's Act 38 of 2005, the primary aim of foster care is to safeguard and nurture children by offering a secure and supportive environment that promotes their well-being (Republic of South Africa, 2006:92). Furthermore, foster care seeks to advance the objectives of permanent planning, initially through family re-unification, or by establishing enduring and nurturing family connections. It also emphasises a commitment to honouring individuals and families through the

appreciation of cultural, ethnic and community diversity (Republic of South Africa, 2006:92).

Van Breda (2015:11) asserts that the pursuit of authentic belonging among care leavers is fundamentally a social endeavour, involving intentional efforts to establish meaningful relationships that address their profound need for connection; as supported by the care leavers' own narrative, when describing that supportive relations play a critical role in shaping their resilience and their perceived prosperity in adulthood.

The researcher has noted that no follow-up is made to the foster care leaver, as there are no mandatory services rendered after transitioning out of care. Accordingly, the researcher holds the view that these foster care leavers just fall by the wayside, as there are no aftercare services rendered. There is no research on the causes of foster care relationship breakdown after youths have left care. Currently, the policy framework fails to explicitly define who holds responsibility for providing services to foster care leavers, as well as the scope and nature of those services (Bond, 2020:31; Van Breda & Frimpong-Manso, 2020:3; Shaw et al., 2020:2). A great support system serves as a source of strength for any individual. It has been noted that a significant number of youths navigate the stage of emerging adulthood with financial and emotional support from their parents, which, despite potential difficulties in the transition, affords them access to valuable support networks and resources (Bond, 2018:26). However, it is not the same with foster care leavers.

Foster care serves as part of the alternative care arrangements in South Africa available for children in need of protection and support, particularly when they are unable to stay with their biological parents. This provision is specified in section 50 of the Children's Act 38 of 2005 (Republic of South Africa, 2006:78). Following the initiation and conclusion of an inquiry at the children's court, these children are then placed with fitting families or individuals who are able and willing to assume the role of foster parents. In the South African context, a child is deemed to be legally in foster care when their care is entrusted to an individual who is not their birth parent or legal guardian, and is carried out either through an order of the children's court or by means of a transfer in accordance with section 171 of the Children's Act 38 of 2005 (Republic of South Africa, 2006:88).

The children in foster care have their needs addressed in their foster family homes until they reach the age of 18, or up to 21 years if they are still attending school, in terms of section 176 (1) and (2) of the Children's Act 38 of 2005 as amended (Republic of South Africa, 2006:90). Van der Walt (2018:623) observed that placement in foster care is commonly regarded as the most effective and generally used type of alternative caregiving arrangement for children who are unable to remain in the care of their birth families, as it typically takes place within a family setting and is intended to provide safety and protection. A breakdown in foster family homes is an issue of great concern because these children end up without families or homes when they reach the stage of adulthood. Consequently, the researcher felt the need to focus on the topic that will solicit what is essential for beneficiaries while they are still in alternative care, and beyond, which could result in ensuring stability in the lives of these foster care beneficiaries.

In addition, section 175(3) of the Children's Act 38 of 2005, as amended (Republic of South Africa, 2006:90), indicates that a Provincial Head of the Department of Social Development in a particular province may issue a discharge notice, formally releasing the alternative caregiver from further obligations concerning the care of the child. The researcher's observation is that, despite the expectation that social workers should provide post-care services to foster care leavers to facilitate a smooth transition out of care, such support is often lacking or insufficient. This lack of services could be attributed to the challenge of a huge caseload carried by social workers, which leaves them with little to no time to concentrate on those who have already left care.

Furthermore, foster parents are frequently unwilling to continue supporting foster care-leavers once they are no longer covered under the provisions of the Children's Act 38 of 2005, and the foster child grant has been discontinued. This then creates social exclusion, as the foster care-leaver is now excluded from benefiting from financial and familial care and support; this has an impact on their education and ability to secure good employment, as per the researcher's observations and the literature alluded to in the previous section. The notion of social exclusion resonates with Van Breda's (2015:35) sentiments, when he shared that obtaining a good education is regarded as a key factor for social inclusion. However, the youth leaving care is often already socially excluded, because they often do not complete their education or obtain good employment.

It is imperative to differentiate between foster care placement and legally adopting a child. Foster care involves the removal of a child who, due to various circumstances, cannot remain with their birth family and place them in the care of a fit, proper and willing family (Van der Walt, 2018:629). The children's court grants a court order to make this arrangement formal. This study will specifically focus on youth who entered the foster care system as a result of orphanhood, neglect, or abandonment, and who have been placed with foster parents in kinship care or unrelated foster care placements.

Based on the information presented above, it is apparent that relations between foster care families and the foster care-leavers are crucial for the youth to fare well; as this is the case, the researcher is concerned about the lack of intense research in South Africa regarding the causes of relationship breakdown between the foster parent(s) and the foster care-leavers. In addition, there seem to be few known programs that help youth who are transitioning into young adulthood and as they leave care. The researcher believes that, if social workers and welfare practitioners better understand the indicators that contribute to the likelihood of homelessness, substance use, and early parenthood, they can begin to target children in foster care who are high risk. If that is achieved, foster care-leavers can be provided with the support they need before they transition out of foster care.

Given that numerous studies have reported on the poor outcomes experienced by care-leavers, it is essential to understand the underlying causes of the relationship breakdown between the foster parent and the foster care-leaver from their own experiences and perceptions, as this can help to develop interventions to respond specifically to their needs when they transition out of the system. The Department of Social Development states that foster care-leavers are expected to participate in a personalised planning process and be connected with external social workers who will offer ongoing support and follow-up services (Department of Social Development, 2019:57).

Bond (2020:32) suggested issuing a foster care-leaver with an information pack that includes details on tertiary education institutions, available bursaries, and how to apply, and contact information for housing, employment and housing, including practical training institutions as part of the aftercare service. This is already in

existence in the US (King, 2016:1). The background provided above gives contextual realities of foster care-leavers and shows the significance of exploring the causes of the relationship breakdown between the foster parent and the foster care leavers. The issue is addressed in the problem statement below.

## **1.2 Problem statement**

Creswell and Creswell (2018:159) refer to the research problem as the challenge that necessitates the study. They elaborate that this need can emanate from many potential sources, such as the researcher's personal experiences or workplace experiences, or the debate in the literature. This study seeks to investigate the causes of the relationship breakdown between the foster parent(s) and foster care-leavers(s), to mitigate the breakdown and promote independent living for foster care-leavers.

The research study steered by Gilligan and Arnau-Sabates (2017:793) in Ireland and Catalonia highlights the critical role of carers in supporting work-related development of young adults, particularly gaining work experience while they are still in foster care, since foster parents play a huge role by giving support. This then suggests that there is a need for a continued healthy relationship between foster care families and the foster care-leavers; however, this is often not achieved due to the high number of broken relationships between the foster care-leavers and their foster families.

The Department of Social Development in the Gauteng Province, wherein this study was executed, promotes the placement of children within family settings as a preferred form of alternative care, and placement in residential care can only be considered as the last resort. In contrast, formal foster care in Ghana is a recent initiative. This development was introduced in accordance with international and national directives aimed at de-institutionalisation and reinforcing care within families (Frimpong-Manso, Cudjoe, Abdullah, Deliege & Eshun, 2021:85).

The goal of foster care is to foster permanency for all children, as mandated by the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Republic of South Africa, 1996:11). This applies not only to children when they are still young but also includes fostering lifelong connections between youths and adults. Although this is the aim of foster care, the researcher has observed that this is hardly achieved in many foster care homes

because of the breakdown or fall-out between the foster parent(s) and the youth when they reach a certain age, or they present with certain risky behaviour.

In South Africa, many children require urgent care, affection as well as a stable family environment. In accordance with the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) fact sheet (Republic of South Africa, 2025) for April 2025, it is indicated that there are 231 511 children in the foster care system in South Africa, while Gauteng Province alone has about 31 740 recipients of the foster child grant.

Research indicates that enduring relationships with supportive adults serves as a significant protective factor against adverse outcomes for the youth as they venture into adulthood, because they offer essential guidance and emotional support that is deemed crucial to the successful transition of a foster care-leaver (Frimpong-Manso, 2020:21). Young people within the foster care system depend on adults for professional and social support in the welfare sector (Bond, 2020:26). Despite the fact emancipated young people yearn for independence from constant adult supervision, their connection to these adult relationships determines their successful emergence to adulthood youth (Frimpong-Manso, 2020:21). The foster care system fosters long-lasting connections; however, in homes where this is not established, what could be the reason?

***The researcher found that there is limited information about the causes of relationship breakdown between the foster parent(s) and foster care-leavers when they reach the age of 21, or when they transition into young adulthood. Literature on foster care instability concentrates on placement disruption that occurs during childhood, and less attention has been given to relational breakdown occurring after youth exit foster care. In addition, there are very limited research studies on foster care-leaving carried out in Africa and especially South Africa; the bulk of the evidence emanates from research carried out on residential care. Furthermore, there are limited studies carried out on kinship foster care, despite it being the major alternative care arrangement on the continent, including South Africa. In conclusion, research on the outcomes of foster care-leavers in South Africa is limited; even less is published in accredited journals.*** The researcher also found that there is no accurate data available on the annual numbers of young people leaving alternative

care as they start living independently (Van Breda, 2015:326; Van Breda & Frimpong-Manso, 2020:3; Frimpong-Manso, 2020:17; Goemans, Van Breda & Kessi 2020:228).

The study by Dhludhlu (2024:23) supports the perspective that if the Children’s Act can be interpreted effectively by the Non-Profit Organisations (NPOs) rendering child protection services including foster care; and by the Department of Social Development, young people can be included in programmes that prepare them for their exit, and later have them integrated to socio-economic programmes within their communities to foster independence.

### 1.3 Significance and Rationale of the Study

Hahn (2015:103) states that the motivation for doing research is the drive the researcher has to become familiar with the information that is available pertaining to the subject the researcher is concerned about. The rationale gives compelling evidence as to why a research study must be carried out and the contribution it will make in that field of study. A research study is conducted to find gaps and provide answers to existing challenges. This research study is conducted because of the researcher’s uncertainty about the causes of relationship breakdown between foster parents and foster care-leavers beyond the age of twenty-one. There seems to be a lack of information in South Africa regarding this subject.

Table 1.1. Below, outlines some of the research studies carried out in South Africa on care leaving:

<b>Author(s)</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Title of study</b>
Dhludhlu, S.L.	2024	The challenges and experiences of youth leaving the foster care system in South Africa
Bond, S.	2020	Care leavers’ and their care workers’ views of preparation and aftercare

		services in the Eastern Cape, South Africa
Goemans, M. Van Breda, A.D. & Kessi, S.	2020	Experiences of young people preparing to transition out of cluster foster care in South Africa
Shaw, M., Steyn, M. & Simeon, E.	2020	The need for preparing youth ageing out of foster care for independent living in South Africa
Van Breda, A.D.	2018	Research Review: Aging out of care in South Africa
Mnisi, R. & Botha, P.	2016	Factors contributing to the breakdown of foster care placement: The perspectives of foster parents and adolescents
Van Breda, A.D. & Dickens, L.	2015	Educational persistence and social exclusion among youth leaving residential care in South Africa

A specific focus has not been paid to the causes of relationship breakdown on foster care leavers placed in foster care most of their lives, who have to suddenly face the challenge of a lack of a support structure once they reach the age of 21years. The above studies have had a tremendous contribution to raising attention on foster care-leavers who seemingly fall by the wayside once they leave care. The researcher finds this topic an area of interest because of the significant number of children within the

foster care system. It is reported that South Africa had 5.2 million orphaned children in 2014, which is an increase of 30 percent from 2004, and this number excludes those placed in CYCC and residential care facilities (Van der Walt, 2018:633).

The researcher has been a practicing social worker for over 15 years, and the collapse of the system is not just in government but also in foster care homes. This made the researcher interested in understanding the causes of relationship breakdown in foster homes, as the youth are about to leave care and understand the needs of these beneficiaries so that appropriate planning that caters to their specific needs can be developed. This should foster long-lasting family bonds and produce responsible adults who were previously in care. There seems to exist a lack of service integration within the Department of Social Development, which makes an employee of the Department not know what is available within the Department if that specific service is not available in their unit.

Young people who exit the foster care system in South Africa face significant difficulties in transitioning to adulthood, and there are no structured support services available to help them once they leave foster care. The generalised structure of legislation and policy connotes that no mandatory services are available to foster care leavers in South Africa. Shaw et al. (2019:2) and Bond (2020:31) indicate that the lack of structured policy might serve as an opportunity to develop a strategy that is tailor-made for the exact necessities of individual foster care leavers, instead of trying to fit every care-leaver into a predetermined programme.

The permanency of placements in foster care is therefore important. Konijn et al (2020:505) state that stable relationships between foster care-leavers and their foster parents play a significant role in preventing the development of academic challenges, behavioural challenges and emotional problems in the life of the youth. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the causes of relationship breakdown between foster parents and youths exiting foster care upon reaching the age of 21. Understanding the causes of relationship breakdown between the foster parent(s) and foster care-leaver(s) will not only help the immediate parties involved but also assist key stakeholders such as child protection organisations; social service professionals, non-governmental organisations, provincial department of social development, community and faith based organisations and policy makers and to provide the needed aid to foster

parent(s) and foster care leaver(s) and lessen any negative outcomes which they might be experienced. Furthermore, this research study could establish guidelines for social work professionals, rendering services to foster care families. Lastly, the study could add significant information for the development of policy and recommendations for practice in social work.

#### **1.4 Research goal/aim and objectives**

The researcher outlines the study's goal and gives clear objectives that were a driving force behind this study.

##### **1.4.1 Research goal/aim**

The research goal centres around the future result of the study, and it must be clear. It is important to note that the research aim, question, and objectives are intertwined; therefore, the decision to describe the overall purpose in general terms is important (Doodey & Bailey, 2016: 22). Thus, goals are defined as projected outcomes from the research study (Ogbeiwi, 2016:547). Furthermore, the goals of the project outline what will be achieved throughout the duration of the study and must correlate with the overall vision and the problem statement. Based on the above definitions, the researcher understands the goal to be an idea one wants to understand more deeply by performing research. The goal of the study is understood to be the result of the study. Therefore, the goal of this study was formulated as follows:

- To develop an in-depth understanding of the causes of the relationship breakdown between foster parent(s) and foster care-leaver(s) after turning 21.

##### **1.4.2 Research objectives**

To attain the goal of the study, it is essential to formulate clear research objectives, and they should be the driving force behind every task that the researcher undertakes and each question that is asked. Determining the objectives of a research study is an essential aspect of planning for its successful execution (Majid, 2017:3). Research objectives should utilise action verbs that can be evaluated, as they articulate what your study aims to accomplish and detail your reasons for conducting that research

study (Doodey & Bailey, 2016: 22). These research objectives described what the researcher intends to achieve by undertaking the research study.

The objectives of this research project are outlined below:

- To explore the causes of the relationship breakdown between foster parent(s) and youth(s) leaving foster care.
- To investigate social support services available for foster parent(s) and youth(s) leaving foster care.
- To examine the needs of the youth(s) leaving foster care and their foster parent(s).
- To explore services received by foster parents and foster care-leavers from social workers to strengthen family relationships.
- To provide recommendations on how to sustain the relationship between the foster parent(s) and youth(s) leaving foster care.

### **1.5 Research question**

The research question is the inquiry that the research study seeks to resolve. The purpose of a qualitative research question is to refine the aim into questions that will be explored in the research project (Creswell & Creswell, 2018:191). The research question identifies precisely what you want to find out in your research project, after you have identified the problem, you wish to address and the gaps in the available literature (Mattick, Johnston & de la Croix, 2018:107). Therefore, the researcher viewed the research question as the underlying rationale that prompted the need for this research.

The research question guiding this investigation is expressed in this manner:

- What are the causes of the relationship breakdown between foster parent(s) and foster care-leaver(s) after turning 21?

### **1.6 Assumptions**

Assumptions the researcher holds regarding this research project are these:

- The youth leaving care globally, regionally, and locally experience various challenges, which include a relationship breakdown with foster parents or caregivers. Häggman-Laitila et al. (2019:634) agree that the journey of young

people who exit foster care upon reaching the age of 21 tends to be more complex compared to those raised by their birth families, as foster care leavers are often required to manage their lives independently at an earlier stage than that of their peers.

- Young people who exit the foster care system in South Africa face significant difficulties in transitioning to adulthood, and there are no structured support services available to help them once they leave foster care. The generalised structure of legislation and policy connotes that no mandatory services are available to foster care leavers in South Africa. Shaw et al. (2019:2) and Bond (2020:31) indicate that the lack of structured policy might serve as an opportunity to develop a strategy that is tailor-made for the exact necessities of individual foster care leavers, instead of trying to fit every care-leaver into a predetermined programme.
- In South Africa, there is a lack of research on outcomes of foster care-leavers, especially in academic journals that are accredited. The researcher also found that there is no accurate data available on the annual numbers of young people leaving alternative care as they start living independently (Van Breda, 2015:326; Van Breda & Frimpong-Manso, 2020:3; Frimpong-Manso, 2020:17; Goemans et al., 2020:228).
- The research assumes that, although emancipated young people yearn for independence from constant adult supervision, their connection to these adult relationships determines their successful emergence to adulthood, as stated by Frimpong-Manso (2020:21).
- Considering that numerous studies have reported on the poor outcomes experienced by foster care-leavers, it is essential to understand the underlying causes of the relationship breakdown between the foster parent and the foster care-leaver from their own experiences and perceptions, as this can help to develop interventions to respond specifically to their needs when they transition out of the system. The Department of Social Development states that care-leavers are expected to participate in an individualised planning process and be connected with external social workers who will offer ongoing support and follow-up services (Department of Social Development, 2019:57).

- This study may benefit all child protection organisations and policy formulators in coming up with strategies that are tailor-made for the young people who have left foster care to ensure that they become autonomous.

### **1.7 Clarification of key concepts**

Defining the key concepts of the study is considered crucial by the researcher, and they are described below:

- **Exploring**

Exploring means to investigate; to seek new insights and find out what is happening with regard to a problem that is not clearly defined or has been under-investigated or is otherwise poorly understood (Rahi, 2017:2). Exploring is finding out about some previously unexamined phenomenon. Exploring is predominantly beneficial when a researcher lacks a clear idea of the issue, so they seek to investigate it through the research study (Kabir, 2016:4). Thus, in this study, the concept 'exploring' is defined as a way of digging deeper into an unknown phenomenon to make it known and give a proper explanation of the matter under study.

- **Causes**

Pearce and Vandenbroucke (2019:2) give two distinct definitions of causes. Firstly, they say that causes are things without which the effect(s) would not have happened. This suggests that there is a causal effect. They further state that causes can be regarded as events or states, and the latter can be regarded as dynamic or fixed (Pearce & Vandenbroucke, 2019:8). In this study, the concept 'causes' can be described as an action that comes before an event. The researcher deduces that causes are the reason something happens or occurs.

- **Relationship breakdown**

Muraya, Korir and Bor (2023:38) define a relationship as a continuing connection between two persons and add that relationships make up an integral part of an individual's identity formation. They further state that a relationship consists of secure communication between two people. To define relationship breakdown, qualities of a good relationship are stated, in contrast to relationship breakdown, as affection,

intimacy, and nurturance; these are indicative of excellent relationship quality, and the relationship breakdown is characterised by conflict, irritation, and resentment (Muraya, Korir & Bor, 2023:38). A relationship breakdown in a foster care placement point to a foster care plan that abruptly ceased with no future planning (Saarnik, 2021:2). The researcher, therefore, concludes that a relationship breakdown is a failure or an end of a coalition or union; this means that people stop sharing a domicile and are no longer interdependent.

- **Foster parent**

A foster parent is deemed to be the custodian for a child who is not theirs biologically or through adoption (Van der Walt, 2018:621). A foster parent is an individual who has been designated and accepts the obligation to care for a foster child through a court order issued by the children's court (Department of Social Development, 2019:16). For this arrangement to be recognised, the child has to be placed legally with the foster parent. A foster parent, according to this study, is someone who has been legally appointed to protect and care for a child who is not their birth child or has adopted the child. Foster care is made legal by the order given by the commissioner of child welfare. The following are the criteria for individual appointment of foster parents (Republic of South Africa, 2006:92):

- One must be 18 years or older.
- They must be found to be fit and proper.
- They must be willing and able to look after the child.
- They must be able to provide a favourable environment for the child's growth and development.

- **Foster care-leaver**

A Foster care-leaver in the United Kingdom is a youth ranging from age 16-25, who has spent a minimum of 13 weeks in local authority care and exited care at or after the age of sixteen (Brown, Alderson, Kaner, McGovern & Lingam, 2019:219). The term is used to refer to any instance when a young person exits the various aspects of foster care, such as the residential placement, educational support, and financial assistance associated with the system (King, 2016:6). Foster care-leavers in South Africa are defined as young individuals who have exited kinship care, cluster foster care, or

residential care, also referred to as Child and Youth Care Centres (CYCCs), upon reaching the age of 18 or 21 (Bond, 2018:77). There are several reasons why young people exit the foster care system, including the following: achieving the majority status, or leaving the CYCC on their own accord or leaving because of breakdown in the placement (Bond, 2018:77). For this study, a foster care-leaver is defined as a young person who was formerly in foster care and transitioned out of the system after reaching the age of 21.

## **1.8 Structure of the dissertation**

This dissertation is comprised of six chapters which are presented below.

- **Chapter One: General background of the study**

Chapter one gives an introduction and a background of this study, followed by the problem statement, the motivation of the study, the research question, the goal and objectives, assumptions and the clarification of key concepts.

- **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

This chapter focuses on a literature review. The key focus will also be on social welfare, a history of the problem, and the policies and legislative framework.

- **Chapter Three: Theoretical frameworks**

The chapter gives a critical review of the two theories applied in this study.

- **Chapter Four: Methodology**

This chapter gives an outline of the research method that guided this research project.

- **Chapter Five: Presentation and Discussion of findings**

This chapter gives a presentation of the key findings of the study and a discussion of the findings.

- **Chapter Six: Conclusions and Recommendations**

The last chapter presents the conclusion of the study and provides recommendations and strategies that will help preserve relationships of foster care-leavers who have turned 21 years and their foster parents.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Introduction

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa includes provisions specifically aimed at safeguarding children. The rights of children are outlined in section 28 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Republic of South Africa, 1996:11), while in section 26 and 27, the emphasis is on the rights of every individual, including children, to receive education, safety, and security (Republic of South Africa, 1996:11). Foster care system came to effect to safeguard the livelihoods of children who are without one or both parents, according to the constitutional mandate on government to care for children. Over the years, the social workers have been unable to provide necessary social welfare services to the communities due to the foster care system being overburdened; this has resulted in many foster care family relations breaking down, more especially after the youth has turned the age of 21, as they are now officially exited from the system. This leaves young people who have left care with no family and ultimately no source of support.

The mission of the Department of Social Development is to establish a self-reliant society, and at the core of its programmes are family preservation services (Department of Social Development, 2022:20). The researcher recalls the aim of foster care as building long-lasting family relations. This goal is seldom realised, as some youth who leave care find themselves without families due to broken relationships. The Children's Act 38 of 2005, which is the custodian of foster care, advocates for the care, protection, and safety of all children. Nonetheless, the same Act does not consider their care and protection when the youth transition to their most vulnerable stage, which is young adulthood. There are no mandated measures put in place to ensure that youth who have left care fare well, and transition smoothly into adulthood, by ensuring the availability of resources.

In this chapter, the researcher deliberates on some important literature that relates to this study. This literature study will begin with a presentation of the history of Social Welfare in South Africa, and then an overview of the foster care system in South Africa, which will entail the purpose and process of foster care, including the types of foster care. The chapter will then investigate the legislative framework of foster care, and lastly discuss the factors leading to relationship breakdown, the role of formal and

informal social support networks, and the needs of families transitioning out of foster care and mechanisms to sustain relationships beyond foster care.

## **2.2. The History of Social Welfare in South Africa**

Social welfare means an all-inclusive service to promote social change and empower individuals through an integrated system of services aimed at enhancing their overall well-being (White Paper for Social Welfare, 1997:5). Historically, the welfare system was under the administration of fourteen separate departments for the different homelands and racial groups. As a result, the services were fragmented, duplicated, inefficient, and ineffective in responding to the needs of communities, as each department had its own priorities and applied its own approaches to rendering a service (White Paper for Social Welfare, 1997:6). There was a need for integrated service delivery. Social welfare services have in the past been rendered by civil society organisations and government, with some organisations aligning their services to government priorities. However, this was not adopted by all organisations, and government had to accelerate transformation to respond to factors in society such as poverty, unemployment and the prevalence of HIV/AIDS, hence the introduction of financial awards policy (Department of Social Development, 2005:4). Organisations such as Child Welfare South Africa were established as a response to social welfare demands of the nation (White Paper for Social Welfare, 1997:6) and to subsequently be funded by government for their services.

Hall, Skelton and Sibanda (2016:69) state that for a number of decades, children entering the foster care system remained significantly low, and it was below 50 000. However, there was a rapid increase in orphanhood in the early 2000s, due to the increase in HIV prevalence, and the state was not providing antiretrovirals; this raised concerns about what would happen to orphans. Based on the information provided by the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, South Africa was deemed as the country severely affected by HIV, and estimates made in the year 2020 submit that just under 20% of people between the ages of 15 and 49 had contracted HIV (Revised White Paper on Families, 2023:34). The previous Child Care Act of 1960 had incorporated the notion of foster care, except that only unrelated placements were made under that traditional foster care model; children were not placed with their own families (Mmolokoe, Vrugt, Matlakala, Tzabedze, Erasmus & Mapaling, 2022:315).

The rise of orphans necessitated adjustment in the child protection policies. A shift came about after the promulgation by Dr Zola Skweyiya, stating that relatives can now foster orphaned children (Sibanda & Ndamba, 2023:43). It is against this background that we saw the emergence of the Children's Act 38 of 2005. Ever since the adoption of the new Act, a significant number of children in the foster care system are looked after by their relatives; this supports the goal of foster care in preserving family ties (Van der Walt, 2018:631; Mmolokoe et al., 2022:315). The Department of Social Development identifies children needing protection and care through a completed investigation by a social (Koyana & Khanye, 2019:5). Section 156 of the children's Act, 38 of 2005 allows the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development to issue an order to safeguard care and protection of a child who lacks such care (Republic of South Africa, 2006:157).

The White Paper for Social Welfare (1997:3) succeeded in noting the widespread challenges related to poverty and unemployment and enacting strategies to reduce poverty, as the existing strategies were no longer effective in addressing those problems (Patel, 2015:57). South Africa is one of the few African countries to successfully implement development social welfare system, guided by key frameworks such as the White Paper on Welfare of 1997 and the White Paper for Reconstruction and Development of (Patel, 2015: 56). The two policies were enacted to right the wrongs of the past systems which were manipulated to favour a certain population and thereby violated the rights of the majority of South Africans (Lombard & Viviers, 2020:2263).

### **2.3. Overview of the foster care system in South Africa**

Foster care is a global concept used to ensure the safety of children. It provides safety to children who are removed from parental care for one reason or another (Koyana & Khanye, 2019:1). Thus, in the system of alternative care, foster care is a method by which the children's court place a child who was found needing protection and care, with a suitably qualified person to safeguard the well-being of the child (Department of Social Development, 2019:57). It is said that, despite foster care being an old form of substitute care arrangement, it was the promulgation of the Children's Act 38 of 2005 that brought a clear definition of alternative care in South Africa (Van der Walt, 2018:623).

This type of care is said to be temporary; however, there are many instances where a foster care placement becomes permanent because the child cannot return to parental care. This is true for many orphaned children placed with relatives or in unrelated placements. The goal of alternative care arrangements is to give a child security by placing them in supportive and nurturing familial environments (Department of Social Development, 2019:57).

In reference to the amended Children's Act 38 of 2005 (Republic of South Africa, 2022:93), a child may be placed in foster care in this manner:

- In an unrelated care placement
- In a related care placement but not with the guardian or parent of the child; or
- In a cluster foster care home that is registered, whose intention is to group resources to serve the foster children and foster parents within the community.

According to section 167 (1) of the Children's Act 38 of 2005, a child is considered to be in alternative care when placed in (Republic of South Africa, 2022:93):

- foster care.
- the care of a Child and Youth Care Centre following an order of a court in terms of this Act, section 29, or Chapter 10 of the Child Justice Act, 2008; and
- temporary safe care.

Children are placed in foster care for a variety of factors, varying from children who are experiencing abuse, the parents are using substances, domestic violence, family relations have broken down, or families are dysfunctional. The duration of placement can be a few days to many years (Koyana & Khanya, 2019: 2). The objectives of placing a child in alternative care are to:

- Align with the goal of life-long care and protection of the child by placing them in a suitable and supportive environment.
- Guarantee continuous safeguarding of children and the delivery of nurturing, responsive care for children who lack such care from their families by offering healthy and secure out-of-home care.
- Make sure that family re-unification services are rendered and that permanent placements are secured for children who cannot be reunified with their families.
- Promote shorter placement of children in temporary safe care.

- Offer supportive services to ensure the smooth reintegration of children with their families.
- Guarantee that the developmental needs of children are appropriately met in alternative care, with programmes tailor-made to their needs (Department of Social Development, 2019:57).

The next section will focus on the purpose of foster care, the process followed in foster care, and the types of foster care placements.

### **2.3.1. Purpose of Foster Care**

Section 181 of the Children's Amendment Act 17 of 2022 outlines the purpose of foster care as follows:

- (a) to protect and nurture children by providing a safe, healthy environment with positive support.
- (b) to promote the goals of permanency planning, first towards family reunification, or by connecting children to other safe and nurturing family relationships intended to last a lifetime; and
- (c) to respect the individual and family by demonstrating a respect for cultural, ethnic, and community diversity (Republic of South Africa, 2022:99).

The best interests of the child should always be considered when placing a child in foster care (Van der Walt, 2018:623). There are procedures, criteria, and regulations that the placement should comply with to ensure the realisation of the purposes of foster care as prescribed in the Children's Act 38 of 2005. It is said that when placing a child in foster care, an order must ascertain that a variety of services are offered to the clients to prepare them for reunification. The following are those services:

- Clinical support services targeting psychological care and emotional distress.
- Positive behaviour regulation.
- Programmes for reunifying families, with a strong focus on family support and development.
- Family preservation services.
- Provision of financial aid in the form of a foster child grant; subsidised ECD; free education and health care.
- Holistic support in transitioning to independent life.

- Management and review of foster care placements (Department of Social Development, 2019:89).

### **2.3.2. The process of foster care**

A child is placed in foster care after an intensive screening of the foster parent has been conducted to confirm their suitability to nurture and protect the child, who cannot be cared for by their birth parents. Section 182 of the Children's Act 38 of 2005, as amended, states that prospective foster parents must be properly assessed and are obligated to comply with certain requirements. The conditions of finding someone to be a suitable foster parent are outlined by the Children's Amendment Act 17 of 2022 (Republic of South Africa, 2022:99); and they are as follows:

- (1) A children's court process must be followed before the court can place a child in foster care. Children's Act 38 of 2005, stipulated in Part 2 of Chapter 9 to the extent that the provisions of that Part applicable to the particular case.
- (2) A prospective foster parent must:
  - (a) be a fit and proper person to be entrusted with the foster care of the child.
  - (b) be willing and able to undertake, exercise, and maintain the responsibilities of such care.
  - (c) have the capacity to provide an environment that is conducive to the child's growth and development; and
  - (d) be properly assessed by a designated social worker for compliance with paragraphs (a), (b) and (c).

Statutory social workers are mandated by Section 155 of the said Act to conduct thorough investigations to confirm circumstances of children who should be deemed as needing care and protection (Republic of South Africa, 2022:88). During this assessment period the social worker must ascertain that due care is provided to the child in accordance with intervention levels, namely: prevention and early intervention, promotion, and awareness before it gets to the statutory level and eventually the continuum of care. The prospective foster parent (s) is then summoned to appear before the court prior to the issuing of the court order. This process ensures state involvement in evaluating whether foster care placement represents the most appropriate course of action for the child concerned (Van der Walt, 2018:625).

According to Van der Walt (2018:625), three key factors are essential for consideration when placing a child in a foster care setting:

- A thorough evaluation of prospective foster caregivers conducted by designated service providers.
- Comprehensive teaching and guidance for those intending to become foster parents; and
- Ongoing and effective support throughout the foster care placement.

When the court is satisfied with the evidence presented before it, the foster care order will then be granted, placing a child with a suitable foster parent for a duration of two years pending family reunification. It is noted, however, that most children are in the foster care placement due to orphanhood, there is no prospect of family reunification. Therefore, Section 186 of the Children's Act allows for a foster care placement of a child to subsist until the child reaches the age of 18 (Republic of South Africa, 2022:101). This addition eliminates the requirements for two-year placement reviews and social work reports, thereby allowing for permanent placement for children who are unable to return to their birth parents (Van der Walt, 2018:625).

### **2.3.3. Types of foster care placements**

The three forms of placements recognised by the Children's Act are discussed below.

- **Kinship foster care**

Section 180 (3) (b) of the Children's Act 38 of 2005 (Republic of South Africa, 2006:99) describes kinship foster care as placement of a child with their family members but not with their birth parents or legal guardians. It is a legally recognised form of care that encompasses values that protect children; therefore, beneficiaries must receive a range of relevant basket services to enhance the carer-giver's resilience and capacity (Department of Social Development, 2019:83). The kinship foster care still carries the largest weight in caring for children lacking parental care, and this has dire financial implications for the family system, and can result in poverty (Van der Walt, 2018:647).

- **Non-Kinship foster care**

This foster care method refers to placing a child with caregivers who are not the relatives of the child, according to Section 180 (3)(a) of the Children's Act 38 of 2005 (Republic of South Africa, 2006:99). Ossorio and de Carvalho (2021:21) explain non-

kinship care as a placement for children who are deemed by the courts or child protection organisations as not qualifying to continue living safely in their own homes due to their unique situations. This is an unrelated placement. The prospective foster parent using this form of care either approaches the Department of Social Development or the NGOs rendering child protection services or is recruited and screened by social workers.

- **Cluster foster care**

This is a form of foster care for children who cannot be cared for by their own parents, but the placement is with individuals who are part of a cluster foster care scheme (Republic of South Africa, 2006:89). Section 183 of the Children's Act 38 of 2005, as amended, stipulates that:

(1) A cluster foster care scheme must be managed in the following manner:

(a) The organisation operating or managing the cluster foster care scheme must be a non-profit organisation registered in terms of the Non-profit Organisations Act, 1997 (Act No. 71 of 1997).

(b) The organisation referred to in paragraph (a) must:

(i) comply with the prescribed requirements; and

(ii) have been approved for providing cluster foster care by the Provincial Head of Social Development; and

(c) The scheme in terms of which cluster foster care is provided must:

(i) comply with the prescribed requirements; and

(ii) have been registered with the Provincial Head of Social Development in the prescribed manner.

(2) The management of a cluster foster care scheme must be monitored by the Provincial Head of Social Development (Republic of South Africa, 2022:89).

## **2.4. Legislative framework on foster care**

Various statutory rules regulate foster care globally, regionally, and in South Africa; and some important legislations are outlined below:

### **2.4.1 White Paper on Social Welfare 1997**

The Revised White Paper for Families (2023:7) founded a model for social welfare services that follows a development approach to empower communities. The White Paper for Social Welfare reiterated the commitment made by the country to ensure

access to basic welfare while upholding human dignity and rendering holistic services to families. The developmental paradigm and promotion of pro-family policies are some of the strategies that are outlined by the White Paper to promote family life (White Paper for Social Welfare, 1997:60). The key factor of the White Paper for vulnerable groups was to build resilient community and family members through kinship care rather than removing children from their families (White Paper for Social Welfare, 1997:64). Although the White Paper has been reviewed, its principles remain the same (Revised White Paper on Families, 2019:5). The White Paper for Social Welfare was against the previously fragmented, rehabilitative-focused policy on social welfare, and favoured a holistic policy that are transformative; shifting the national response to family needs, from charity to empowerment (White Paper for Social Welfare, 1997:7)

#### **2.4.2. The Integrated Service Delivery Model (ISDM) 2006**

South Africa's social welfare history challenged the new government to address the disparities of the past. The Integrated Service Delivery Model was adopted to address such, as it moved from the residual approach in delivering services to development approach, ensuring the involvement of various stakeholders in alternative care services (Department of Social Development, 2016:28). This policy served as a guide for ensuring the delivery of comprehensive, holistic and integrated services to those who are in need, under the developmental paradigm (Integrated Service Delivery Model, 2006:25). Thus, this framework was established to implement the ideologies of the White Paper for Social Welfare following the levels of service delivery (Strydom, Schiller & Orme, 2020:384). The researcher has observed that, in practice, service delivery is on the statutory level, but the ideal is rendering services on the prevention and early intervention level to prevent social and personal problems from becoming social ills.

#### **2.4.3 National Youth Policy (NYP) 2020-2030**

This policy is built on the previous NYP policies covering 2009-2014 and 2015-2020. Young people represent a powerful resource in the nation. The youth in South Africa have been shaped by historic struggles of social exclusion and discrimination. Therefore, this policy is aimed at bridging the historic divides by making sure that the

needs of the youth are clearly communicated in policies and ensuring young people participation in economic activities that build South Africa (Republic of South Africa, 2020:1). Its desired outcome is to empower the youth with information and skills so that they can make their contribution to the nation's growing democracy (Republic of South Africa, 2020:3). The NYP acknowledges the persistent challenges faced by the youth with the majority of those emanating from the apartheid era. The policy cites parental poverty as an example of challenges that have a domino effect on how the young person turns out in life, firstly in the area of education, and in the area of employment later on in life (Republic of South Africa, 2020:8). This policy thus adopts these challenges as its priority focused areas.

#### **2.4.4 United Nations Convention on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (UNCRC) 1989**

This is a pertinent agreement by different countries that have safeguarded children's rights and well-being. This agreement asserts that all rights are equally important and, as such, no right should be taken away from the child. The state parties agree that children's rights holds the highest significance and that the state is a significant role player that ensures that these rights are upheld in conjunction with parental responsibilities and rights (UNCRC, 1989:4) The United Nations Convention on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (UNCRC) is founded by four principles; that is, the child's survival rights, the right to full development, to not be subjected to discrimination, and child participation (Department of Social Development, 2019:111).

#### **2.4.5 African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) 1979**

The ACRWC came to respond to the unique needs of an African child. It was noted that an African child needs special safeguarding due to the unusual circumstances they grow up in such as war and poverty (African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the child [ACRWC], 1990:2). Even so, it was acknowledged by all parties involved that the proper development of an African child depends on positive and nurturing familial care. Thus, the state must ensure the performance of duties on the part of everyone involved (ACRWC, 1990:3). The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) operates by similar principles to the UNCRC. These principles mandate the states to pay special focus on issues affecting the African child (Department of Social Development, 2019:111). It encourages all

individuals within the communities and families to pull resources together to establish a conducive environment for the child to thrive (Department of Social Development, 2019:111).

#### **2.4.6 The Constitution of South Africa Act 108 of 1996**

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa 1996 identifies and ensures the protection of children from all forms of social ills so children can develop optimally (Department of Social Development, 2019:38). The Constitution, in section 28 (1)(b)(c)(d) outlines three rights of children, which are:

- The right to family care, parental care, or appropriate alternative care.
- The right to social services.
- The right to protection from abuse, neglect, maltreatment, and degradation (Republic of South Africa, 1996:11).

The responsibility to care for the vulnerable groups of society is imposed on the government (Van der Walt, 2018:619). The people who cannot sustain themselves and their dependents are to be cared for by the government as stipulated in section 27(c) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996:11).

Section 28 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996:11) explicitly identifies, acknowledges, and protects children's rights and their care. The National Development Plan agenda emphasises the urgency to fight intergenerational poverty through investment in quality programmes for children that will, in turn, build a solid foundation for sustainable growth (Department of Social Development, 2019:101). Financing services that safeguard the welfare of children are mandatory.

#### **2.4.7 The Social Assistance Act 13 of 2004**

With the promulgation of this act came the introduction of social security grants that were aimed at responding to the needs of orphaned children and poverty, considering the scourge of HIV/AIDS. The foster parents could then access the foster child grant for their foster children (Van der Walt, 2018:621). The minister must ensure the availability of funds for the Foster Child Grant in accordance with section 4 (c) of the Act, and Section 5 of the Social Assistance Act 13 of 2004 stipulates the criteria for eligibility for social assistance (Republic of South Africa, 2004:10). Additional to the financial aid is a basket of services such as supervision of placement done by social

service professionals (Hall et al., 2016:69). In essence the Social Assistance Act was enacted to look after the needs of the vulnerable groups of society.

#### **2.4.8 The Children's Act 38 of 2005**

The regulations on foster care for orphaned and abandoned children are outlined in Chapter 11 of the Children's Act 38 of 2005 (Republic of South Africa, 2022:93-98). This Chapter stipulates that the court will make a decision based on the social worker's report outlining the plight of the child (Republic of South Africa, 2022:88). An appropriate order will then be issued based on what is best for the child. Section 150 of the Children's Act 38 of 2005 states that a child needs care and protection if they fall under these categories (Republic of South Africa, 2022:83).

- (a) "has been abandoned or orphaned and has no family member who is able and suitable to care for that child;
- (b) displays behaviour which cannot be controlled by the parent or caregiver;
- (c) lives or works on the streets or begs for a living;
- (d) is addicted to a dependence-producing substance and is without any support to obtain treatment for such dependency;
- (e) has been exploited or lives in circumstances that expose the child to exploitation;
- (f) lives in or is exposed to circumstances which may seriously harm that child's physical, mental or social wellbeing;
- (g) may be at risk if returned to the custody of the parent, guardian or caregiver of the child, as there is reason to believe that he or she will live in or be exposed to circumstances which may seriously harm the physical, mental, or social well-being of the child;
- (h) is in a state of physical or mental neglect;
- (i) is being maltreated, abused, deliberately neglected, or degraded by a parent, a caregiver, a person who has parental responsibilities and rights, or a family member of the child, or by a person in whose care the child is;
- (j) is an unaccompanied migrant child from another country;
- (k) is a victim of trafficking; or
- (l) has been sold by a parent, caregiver or guardian."

## **2.5 Factors leading to relationship breakdown between foster parents and youth exiting care**

A significant portion of the literature on foster care instability concentrates on placement disruption that occurs during childhood, and less attention has been given to relational breakdown occurring after youth exit statutory care. However, developmental, cognitive, emotional, and behavioural challenges are seen in youth at higher rates than those seen in children who are generally developing (Maguire, May, McCormack & Fosker, 2024:641). While placement breakdown and post-care relational breakdown are related, they are conceptually distinct. Placement breakdown refers to the termination of the foster arrangement during care, whereas relational breakdown refers to the weakening or severing of emotional, social, or practical ties after legal care has ended (Blodgett, 2022:10).

Understanding the causes of post-care relational breakdown requires examining systemic, financial, behavioural, and relational factors that shape the transition to adulthood.

- **Inadequate relational transition planning**

Research indicates social workers are inundated with huge caseloads and the administration that the finalisation and review of foster care cases entail. Consequently, social workers rarely get extended periods for comprehensive transition planning that explicitly addresses relational continuity between foster parents and youth; this implies a possible breakdown of the foster care arrangement, which is damaging to the sense of security and belonging of the child (Van der Walt, 2018:638). Cater and van Breda (2016:211) argue that social workers do not have practical knowledge of assessing foster parents, because there is no adequate training provided by universities on the practical implementation of foster care. Thus, social workers may fail to facilitate structured, intentional discussions about relational adjustment and continuity beyond the statutory care period.

While permanency planning is emphasised during care in Sections 105 and 106 of the Children's Act 38 of 2005 as amended (Republic of South Africa, 2022:52), structured discussions about post-care relational expectations are frequently absent. Without facilitated conversations about future roles, financial responsibilities, boundaries, and continued contact, foster parents and foster care leavers may enter the post-care

phase with mismatched expectations. Such ambiguity increases the risk of misunderstanding and eventual disengagement.

- **Financial strain following termination of the foster child grant**

The lack of financial support for youth who exited care is a considerable burden for both the young person and their foster families. During their time in care, the state assumes responsibility for the child, ensuring access to free education, healthcare, and the Foster Child Grant. However, when the youth exit care, financial support by the government is terminated, which is unlike in countries, for instance, the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom, which offer established support programmes for care-leavers (Shaw et al., 2019:3). The termination of the Foster Child Grant upon exit from care represents a critical turning point. Research shows that the grant significantly contributes to the educational and socio-economic stability of foster households (Dhludhlu & Lombard, 2017:169). This correlates with the findings by Goemans et al. (2020:229), which also showed that discontinuing the Foster Child Grant had severe adverse financial implications for many foster care-leavers who are reported to have found themselves with no money to cover their daily living expenses and consequently dropped out of school. In certain foster care families, the Foster Child Grant serves as the only financial stream, covering the financial needs of the entire household (Shaw et al., 2019:3).

Therefore, when the foster care grant ceases, foster parents may face increased financial pressure, particularly if the foster care leaver remains unemployed or continues residing in the household. Economic stress can exacerbate conflict, especially when foster parents feel unable to sustain ongoing support. Based on the literature provided above, a conclusion can be that a number of family members rely heavily on the social grant and are only able to nurture the foster child as long as they continue to receive this financial support. Thus, the cessation of financial support functions not only as an economic shift but also as a relational stressor that may contribute to breakdown.

- **Behavioural and mental health challenges**

The behaviour difficulties and unresolved trauma among foster children have been noted as posing the highest risk to the foster care placement (Konijn et al., 2020:494).

While these behaviours may have been managed within structured care settings, they may resurface or intensify during the transition to adulthood.

Emerging adulthood is characterised by identity exploration and risk-taking behaviours. For foster care-leavers, this stage may intersect with unresolved attachment disruptions and mental health vulnerabilities (Harkin & Houston, 2016:12). It is further noted that becoming one with the foster family is a substantial milestone for the youth, as this protects placement disruption amidst challenging behaviours by the youth. Thus, the stable environment created by the foster families plays a crucial role in the successful emergence of the youth to adulthood (Harkin & Houston, 2016:12). Conversely, foster parents who feel ill-equipped to manage these behaviours without professional support may withdraw emotionally or physically from the relationship. Furthermore, substance abuse and conflictual interactions, as noted by Mnisi and Botha (2016:232), may strain post-care bonds, particularly in the absence of structured mediation or counselling services.

- **Early parenthood and role conflict**

The studies conducted revealed that adolescent pregnancy is declining in developed countries such as the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK), however, the prevalence of pregnancy and early parenthood among youth in care in Africa is concerning (Frimpong-Manso, Bukuluki, Addy, Obeng & Kato, 2022:683). Early parenthood introduces additional financial and caregiving demands that may place strain on foster families (Mnisi & Botha, 2016:234); the roles within the family change as the youth now becomes a parent. Foster parents may be expected to provide support not only to the foster care leaver but also to the newborn child. Early parenting leads to the retraction of social support. Therefore, in socio-economically constrained households, this additional responsibility may contribute to conflict, especially if expectations regarding support are not mutually agreed upon (Frimpong-Manso et al., 2022:688). Thus, early parenthood may accelerate relational strain during an already vulnerable transition period.

- **Systemic and policy gaps**

The developmental theorists emphasise that youths ranging from age 18 to 25 face difficulties in navigating specific developmental tasks that are inherent to this stage of their development (Pryce, Napolitano & Samuels, 2017:1). They further state that this

stage is further complicated for foster care-leavers, because they have to juggle this stage with a simultaneous exit from the foster care system. In the South African context, a child is defined as a person under the age of 18, so youth above the age of 18 are deemed as adults (Republic of South Africa, 2005:14). Accordingly, when a youth turns 21 years, they legally exit the system. This automatically puts them at a disadvantage because while other young people who are in the care of their families enjoy cushioned support from their parents, these young people who exit care do not. Policies and practices in the welfare sector limit what are normal age-appropriate activities, thereby hindering the youth from acquiring the much-needed skills while they are in care; when they leave care, they are ill-prepared for the realities they have to navigate through (Ball, Hofer, Ding, Sevillano & Faulkner, 2023:4).

State parenting often operates from a premise of risk management and protection strategies over relational sustainability (Collins, 2018:8). Thus, statutory responsibilities override mental issues, building secure attachments and physical interactions. Therefore, the focus of social workers while the youth were in care was administrative, and now that they have left care, there are no mandated services prescribed by the system to help the youth navigate their journey to adulthood with support. Thus, foster parents and youth are left to navigate their relationship without social welfare support, as there is no obligated support for youth who were previously in foster care after obtaining the age of majority (van der Walt, 2018:622).

This structural withdrawal of support may inadvertently contribute to relational disengagement. In the US, there has been an acknowledgement of challenges faced by young adults as they strive towards obtaining autonomy and independence. To mitigate some of these challenges, policy adjustments have been made; for example, the states can now use federal funds to offer support to youth ageing out of care (Pryce et al., 2017:1); young people are now permitted to continue benefitting from their parent's health care insurance up to the age of 26, and not until the age of 18 as it was the case previously (Pryce et al., 2017:2). However, most of the foster families have no formalised relational aftercare structures or policies that ensure continuity of support to the youth who leave care through emancipation (Jones, 2019:262). The latter is true with the Children's Act in South Africa.

The causes of relationship breakdown between foster parents and youth exiting foster care are multifaceted and intertwined. Financial strain, behavioural challenges, inadequate transition planning, early parenthood, and systemic policy gaps collectively create conditions under which family bonds may weaken, and all these can significantly influence relational sustainability.

## **2.6 Social support services available to foster parents and youth exiting foster care**

Social support plays a critical role in promoting stability within foster care families and facilitating positive transitions for youth exiting care (Bukuluki et al., 2020:42). However, the availability, accessibility, and relational effectiveness of these services vary considerably. This study examines the relationship breakdown between foster parents and youth exiting care; therefore, it is necessary to explore not only what support services exist, but also how these services influence relational continuity after statutory care ends.

Social support networks are not limited to formal structures such as clinics and schools; informal and community networks are also crucial, as both forms of support have implications for the sustainability of foster parent and youth relationships.

- **Formal Support Services**

### ***Legislative and Policy Framework***

In the South African context, child protection and foster care services are governed primarily by the Children's Act 38 of 2005, which provides for alternative care placement and outlines the responsibilities of the state in safeguarding vulnerable children. While the legislation emphasises permanency planning during care, it provides limited structured guidance regarding relational continuity once the youth exits care at the age of majority.

Although policy frameworks acknowledge the importance of preparing youth for independent living, implementation remains inconsistent. The Department of Social Development outlines certain mechanisms to ascertain the effective after-care preparation and support for care leavers as follows:

- “An efficient tracking system to keep track of all the children once they exit foster care.

- Peer support networks to provide a mentoring and support role to children upon leaving alternative care.
- A youth development sector that is linked to the children’s sector and has an obligation and ability to deliver suitable after-care support programmes for children as they evolve from childhood to adulthood.
- Strong networks between the children’s sector and the private sector to promote job creation for the youth on the margins as they exit care.
- Ongoing, systematically accessible learning and training opportunities for assisting youth leaving care to obtain financial independence; and
- Available and accessible health care and relevant financial aid for youth leaving care” (Department of Social Development, 2019:88).

However, evidence suggests that these mechanisms are not applied in practice. The absence of mandated relational post-care services creates a gap whereby foster parents and youth must negotiate continued relations informally, without structured professional facilitation. This lack of systemic guidance may contribute to misunderstandings, unmet expectations, and eventual relationship breakdown.

- **Financial Support Mechanisms**

The Foster Child Grant, administered through the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA), constitutes a primary form of financial support during foster care placement. Research indicates that this grant significantly contributes to the educational and socio-economic wellbeing of foster children (Dhludhlu & Lombard, 2017:169). However, once the youth exit care, this financial support is terminated. Thus, while financial support mechanisms exist during care, the lack of transitional financial assistance post-care may contribute to foster parent–youth relationships.

- **Educational and aftercare provisions**

It was discussed in a media statement by the government in September 2018 that former foster youth should not be subjected to the means test that other youth are subjected to when they apply for NSFAS, and they must automatically qualify for funding (Republic of South Africa, 2023). This will help the youth who have ambitions of pursuing their studies to receive the financial support they need. This has, however, not been promulgated as law. There is a need for social workers to sign affidavits that confirm that the youth was previously in care. The Fees must Fall campaign resulted

in the government allocating more funds to provide free education for the poor and middle-class students in government universities (Republic of South Africa, 2021:9). While such initiatives, which give former foster youth access to higher education funding, reflect progressive intent, there remains limited empirical evidence demonstrating consistent advantages for foster care-leavers. Moreover, unlike countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom, where extended care models allow continued support beyond 21 years (Shaw et al., 2019:3), South Africa lacks a formally institutionalised “extended foster care” system. This lack of structure leaves continued care and relationship to personal choice.

- **Informal and community-based support networks**

Beyond statutory services, informal networks play a significant role in supporting foster families and foster care-leavers. These could be faith-based organisations, community forums, peer support groups, youth development programmes, and extended family systems. Evidence from community initiatives, such as youth health collaborations in areas like Khayelitsha (Jamieson, Berry & Lake, 2017:59), demonstrates the potential of integrated government and non-profit partnerships in promoting youth wellbeing. Peer networks and mentorship programmes may provide ongoing relational anchors for youth transitioning to adulthood. The evidence further shows that support groups for foster parents and youth leaving care helped in providing regular contact, thereby enhancing opportunities to build and maintain strong relationships in communities, which ultimately benefit the family relations (Jamieson et al., 2017:59)

Research by Bukuluki et al. (2020:40) indicates that youth who maintained supportive family connections during and after care demonstrated more positive mental health and adaptive functioning. Similarly, Frimpong-Manso (2020:19) found that enduring supportive relationships with caregivers and practitioners contributed significantly to successful transitions. However, access to community support is often shaped by geographic location, socio-economic context, and the strength of local societal structures. Consequently, relational sustainability between foster parents and youth may depend heavily on external social capital, which is unevenly distributed.

Literature indicates that while multiple forms of social support are available to foster families and youth exiting care, these supports are fragmented and inconsistently implemented. Financial assistance, educational provisions, and community networks

contribute positively to youth outcomes; however, structured relational aftercare remains limited within the South African context. Therefore, a critical examination of how existing support systems function in practice is essential to understanding relational sustainability beyond statutory care.

## **2.7 Needs of youth exiting care and foster parents during the transition to adulthood**

As highlighted by The House Bill Report for Washington State (2006), “When an average youth from an average integral family graduates, he or she receives a party, a computer, or a car. Comparatively, when foster care youth turn[s] 18 and receive a diploma, they lose their housing, support, and medical assistance as a reward”. Transitioning out of foster care is not a singular event but a developmental and relational process that unfolds over time (Jones, 2019:278). There is limited literature that has examined the relational needs of both foster care leavers and their foster parents during this critical period of transitioning. Given that this study explores the relationship breakdown between foster parents and foster care leavers, it is necessary to examine how unmet emotional, financial, and relational needs may destabilise these relationships.

- **Emotional and relational needs of youth exiting care**

Emerging adulthood is characterised by identity formation, autonomy-seeking, and emotional restructuring (Singer & Berzin, 2015:79). However, for youth exiting care, this developmental stage coincides with the abrupt withdrawal of statutory support. Studies show that the youth report feeling emotionally unsupported and a lack of safe spaces and trusting relationships with adults who love and care for them after exiting care (Ball et al., 2023:4).

As the youth leave foster care, it is a critical time for them to self-evaluate and find their own identities, and therefore, they are bound to make mistakes as they navigate this stage. However, there is no provision for them to go back to their foster care home for emotional and social support, unlike their peers who may rely on biological families for ongoing emotional reassurance. Mmolokoe et al. (2022:319) assert that emotional support from social service practitioners is vital in strengthening youths and their foster carers as they navigate the period of separation. The evidence from their study showed that foster care-leavers need safe spaces, mentorship, and sustained

guidance, more so in decision-making processes. When these relational supports are inconsistent or unavailable, tensions may emerge, especially if the foster care leaver continues to rely on the foster parent for emotional reassurance without formal social welfare structures facilitating that ongoing connection. Thus, the emotional needs of youth leaving foster care are not solely individual concerns but relational factors that influence the sustainability of foster family bonds.

- **Financial and practical needs of youth exiting care**

The literature highlights unemployment and financial instability as major challenges confronting care-leavers (Häggman-Laitila et al., 2019:657; Jones, 2019:262). In the South African context, these vulnerabilities are compounded by high youth unemployment rates and limited economic transformation (Department of Social Development, 2021:198). Financial instability has direct relational implications. When youth remain economically dependent on foster parents after the termination of the Foster Child Grant, foster families may experience strain because the youth is inadequately equipped for living autonomously and they face financial challenges, as the financial support they had relied on was cut as they exited care (Dhludhlu, 2024:556), particularly in households where the grant constituted a significant portion of household income. This economic pressure can lead to conflict, resentment, or withdrawal, thereby increasing the risk of relational breakdown. Moreover, literature suggests that many youths exiting care lack adequate life skills preparation, including budgeting, job-seeking competencies, and independent living skills Gilligan and Arnau-Sabatés (2017:792). Therefore, financial and practical vulnerabilities are not merely socio-economic challenges; they function as stressors that may destabilise foster parent and foster care leaver relationships post-care.

- **Social Inclusion and Belonging**

Gilligan and Arnau-Sabatés (2017:792-793) assert that there are two major structures of social inclusion for the youths who are not fully integrated, and these are education and work or employment. Furthermore, being unemployed for an extended period of time predisposes the youth to social exclusion, more so for the youth in the marginalised groups. Belongingness is central to the stability of a relationship. Literature shows that youth who perceive themselves as peripheral members of foster families after exiting care may disengage emotionally (Van der Walt, 2018:638; Van Breda, 2015:11; Colbridge et al., 2017:11). Conversely, foster parents may experience

uncertainty about the boundaries of their ongoing responsibility that was previously shared with the state (Van der Walt, 2018:625). This ambiguity regarding belonging and permanence means relational continuity depends on the goodwill of individuals rather than systemic support.

- **Foster parent needs during and after care termination**

While literature documents some of the challenges faced by foster care-leavers, significantly less attention is given to the needs of foster parents during this transition. As alluded to in the previous text, foster parents may experience emotional loss or ambiguity when the youth exit care (Van der Walt, 2018:625), particularly where strong attachments have formed; the termination of formal care may feel abrupt and unsupported. Foster parents also experience financial vulnerability. The termination of the foster child grant may threaten household functioning, especially in socio-economically disadvantaged contexts (Shaw et al., 2019:3). Where foster parents continue to provide accommodation or financial assistance without state support, they may experience stress and fatigue. Additionally, foster parents often report limited preparation for managing the transition from legal caregiver to informal supporter (Mmolokoe et al. 2022:319). Thus, examining the needs of foster parents alongside those of youth exiting care is critical in understanding the dynamics of relationship sustainability.

- **Systemic and structural influences on relational needs**

Developmental theorists emphasise that individuals aged 18–25 continue to require support as they navigate adulthood (Pryce, Napolitano & Samuels, 2017:1). However, South African legislation defines adulthood strictly in chronological terms, thereby limiting statutory obligations once the youth attain the age of majority (Republic of South Africa, 2005:14). Thus, after the foster care leaver reaches the age of 21 years, social worker involvement ceases, as a result, bonds that were developed within a supervised context may weaken. The absence of mandated after-care relational frameworks means that ongoing connections between foster parents and foster care-leavers rely primarily on informal arrangements. High social worker caseloads and administrative burdens further reduce the possibility of structured relational transition planning (van der Walt, 2018:622). These systemic gaps may inadvertently contribute to relational breakdown by failing to acknowledge that the termination of legal care does not automatically dissolve emotional bonds. Without deliberate relational

transition planning, both youth and foster parents may struggle to redefine their connection.

## **2.8 Services received by foster parents and foster care-leavers from social workers to strengthen family relationships**

- **Case management and supervisory support**

Research studies show that social workers play a central role in facilitating stability within foster care placements and preparing families for transition (Pote, Dykes & Carelse, 2022:78; Mmolokoe et al., 2022:319). Therefore, case management by social workers involves statutory supervision, monitoring placement wellbeing, conducting reviews, and ensuring compliance with the legislation Konijn et al. (2020:505).

However, research indicates that social workers in South Africa face significant caseload pressures and administrative burdens (Van der Walt, 2018:638; Sibanda & Ndamba, 2023:47). As a result, supervisory visits may prioritise compliance and documentation over relational strengthening (Shaw et al., 2020:4). While statutory oversight ensures child protection, it may inadequately address emotional dynamics within foster families (Collins (2018:8). This limited time for in-depth relational engagement restricts opportunities for strengthening communication between foster parents and foster care leavers, particularly as the youth approaches the age of exit. Consequently, relational tensions may remain unresolved until after statutory support has ceased.

- **Parenting skills training and behavioural support**

Literature suggests that behavioural difficulties and unresolved trauma are key stressors within foster families (Konijn et al., 2020:494). Social workers are expected to equip foster parents with parenting strategies to manage trauma-related behaviours and adolescent developmental challenges. However, inadequate practical training and limited ongoing support may reduce foster parents' confidence in handling emerging adult behavioural complexities (Cater & van Breda, 2016:211). Where foster parents feel unsupported or ill-equipped to respond to the needs of the foster care leaver, relational strain may intensify, particularly during adolescence and early adulthood (Republic of South Africa, 2021:1). Therefore, strengthening parenting capacity, particularly for managing emerging adulthood behaviours, may contribute significantly to sustaining relational bonds beyond care.

- **Transition planning as a relational intervention**

Feather, Allen, Crompton, Jones, Christiansen, and Butler (2024:1589) state that transition planning is often framed as preparation for independent living; however, its relational dimension is equally critical. Furthermore, key components of effective transition support and planning should include facilitated discussions concerning expectations regarding continued contact, financial responsibilities post-care, emotional support, boundaries, and conflict resolution mechanisms (Feather et al., 2024:1589)

The researcher has observed that the relational adjustments and role renegotiation required after leaving care are often overlooked. It is taken for granted that the foster parent and the foster care leaver will transition smoothly with no complications. However, practice shows that, without structured mediation and support services, foster parents and youth leaving foster care may hold differing assumptions about the future of their relationship and the role each one plays in the life of another (Williams-Butler, Ryan, McLoyd, Schulenberg & Davis-Kean, 2018:3284). The absence of clearly facilitated relational planning may therefore contribute to post-care breakdown.

- **Emotional support and mediation**

Emerging evidence highlights the importance of emotional support from social service practitioners in strengthening family bonds (Mmolokoe et al., 2022:319). Yet high workloads and systemic constraints often limit sustained emotional engagement (Pryce et al., 2017:6). Family mediation services during and after the transition phase may provide a platform for addressing misunderstandings before they escalate (Mnisi & Botha, 2016:238). However, social workers were unavailable to render such services. Ultimately, where professional mediation is absent, conflicts may remain unresolved, increasing the likelihood of detachment between foster parents and youth.

- **Structural limitations affecting relational support**

State parenting often operates within a framework of risk management and administrative accountability (Collins, 2018:8); the emphasis is on physical safety and adhering to the legislation (Williams-Butler et al., 2018:3284). While these priorities are necessary, they may overshadow relational development. Once foster care youth exit care, statutory involvement diminishes significantly. The Children's Act only makes provision for the review of the foster child grant if the youth is still in school (Republic

of South Africa, 2006:175). Otherwise, social worker involvement often ceases, leaving foster parents and foster care-leavers to navigate complex emotional transitions independently. As a result, bonds that were developed within a supervised context may weaken.

Although social workers are positioned as key facilitators of relational stability, systemic constraints limit their ability to provide sustained relational strengthening interventions. While case management, parenting support, and transition planning exist in principle, their implementation often prioritises compliance over relational continuity. The unavailability of structured relational mediation and post-care follow-up services highlights a significant gap in practice, one that may contribute to relationship breakdown between foster parents and youth exiting care.

## **2.9 Strategies in literature to sustain foster parent and foster care leaver relationships beyond care**

As alluded, there is a substantial literature that documents the vulnerabilities faced by foster care leavers; comparatively fewer studies focus explicitly on strategies to sustain foster parent and youth leaving foster care relationships after foster care ends. Given the risk factors identified above, it is necessary to explore interventions and policy approaches that may promote relational continuity. There is a need for continued social, emotional, and financial assistance for both foster parents and young people exiting foster care. Literature suggests that sustaining relationships between foster parents and foster care leavers requires deliberate structural, relational, and economic interventions, as foster care leavers often lack the familial safety nets that support their peers in the general population (Häggman-Laitila et al., 2019:634; Van Breda & Frimpong-Manso, 2020:4).

In several international contexts, like the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom, extended care policies have been implemented to allow youth to remain in foster placements beyond the traditional age of exit, they have established support programmes for foster care leavers (Shaw et al., 2019:3). For example, “Staying Put” arrangements in the United Kingdom enable young adults to continue residing with foster families while gradually transitioning to independence (Alderson, Smart, Kerridge, Currie, Johnson, Kaner, Lynch, Munro, Swan & McGovern, 2023:871). Although South Africa does not currently implement a comparable formalised

extended care model, the principles underpinning such frameworks may offer valuable insights for relational sustainability. The concept of relational permanency emphasises lasting emotional connections rather than solely legal permanence. Literature suggests that young people benefit significantly from knowing that supportive adults remain accessible beyond statutory care (Alderson, et al., 2023:889; McDonald & Marshall, 2021:18).

In the South African context, it is noted that some care leavers from Child and Youth Care Centres (CYCCs) receive structured assistance for tertiary studies, including bursaries, transport funding, and pocket money (Bond, 2020:30). This represents an example of promising practice within residential care setting, where financial and practical support mechanisms are intentionally built into aftercare services. While residential care leavers may access formalised aftercare packages, foster care leavers often rely heavily on the personal capacity of foster parents or the discretion of a social worker. Mendes, Snow and Baidawi (2016:30) argue that economic insecurity is a key contributor to instability during care transitions, and this financial pressure can undermine otherwise stable relational bonds. As noted, in the South African context, relationally focused aftercare mechanisms remain limited and inconsistently implemented, thus necessitating further research to close the existing gaps.

## **2.10. Conclusion**

The social welfare system in South Africa has improved, as evidenced by policies that were enacted by the newly elected government post-apartheid, and this is something the South African government can be commended for. One major achievement of the government was the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa as the overarching policy, which is a major role in ensuring equal opportunities in acquiring resources and ensuring social security, especially for the vulnerable groups. The policy concerning the safeguarding of children has not been met without challenges, as the literature above alludes to the gaps in rendering social work services for those who are placed in foster care and preparing them for independence as they exit foster care. It is purported that the system is overburdened by administrative work, leaving the Department of Social Development, as the custodian of implementing foster care, with limited manpower to fully give the desired social welfare services to foster youth and foster parents before they exit the foster care system. This results in a breakdown in

relationships in families, thereby compromising the smooth transition of the foster care-leaver into adulthood. Youth leaving foster care are faced with multiple challenges as they evolve from childhood to being adults, and their situation is worse than that of their counterparts who are raised by their parents.

Furthermore, there are notable existing policy gaps in South Africa with regard to the care of the youth who have left care. There seems to be no mandated independent living programmes for the youth after they turn the age of 21, thus making their transition to adulthood abrupt. Hence, the outcomes of youth who left care are not as good compared to their peers. Building a strong support structure for families in transition is vital for positive integration into adulthood. Many services prioritise risk management and administrative compliance rather than relational strengthening. High caseloads limit social workers' capacity to provide consistent relational mediation or transition planning. As a result, preparation for post-care relational renegotiation may be insufficient. The literature indicates that youth exiting care face significant emotional, financial, and social vulnerabilities. However, these challenges must be understood relationally, as they directly influence the sustainability of foster parent and youth bonds. Similarly, foster parents experience emotional and financial needs that are often overlooked in policy and practice discussions. In this study, the researcher explored the causes of the relationship breakdown between foster parents and foster care-leavers who have turned 21 years old.

## **CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study adopted two conceptual frameworks, which are relevant to exploring and understanding the causes of the relationship breakdown between foster parent(s) and foster care-leaver(s). A theoretical framework is a collection of connected ideas that provide the lenses through which researchers view and interpret their data, by outlining the relationships between variables to explain facts and events; therefore, it is important to choose a suitable theoretical framework for the success of the research study (Omodan, 2022:276). In this research study, the Ecological Systems Theory (EST) and Ubuntu Theory were used. The researcher hopes that these two theoretical frameworks will provide the context for exploring the causes of the relationship breakdown between the foster parent and the foster care-leaver, particularly when the foster care-leaver reaches the age of 21. These frameworks and their application are discussed below.

### **3.1 Ecological Systems Theory**

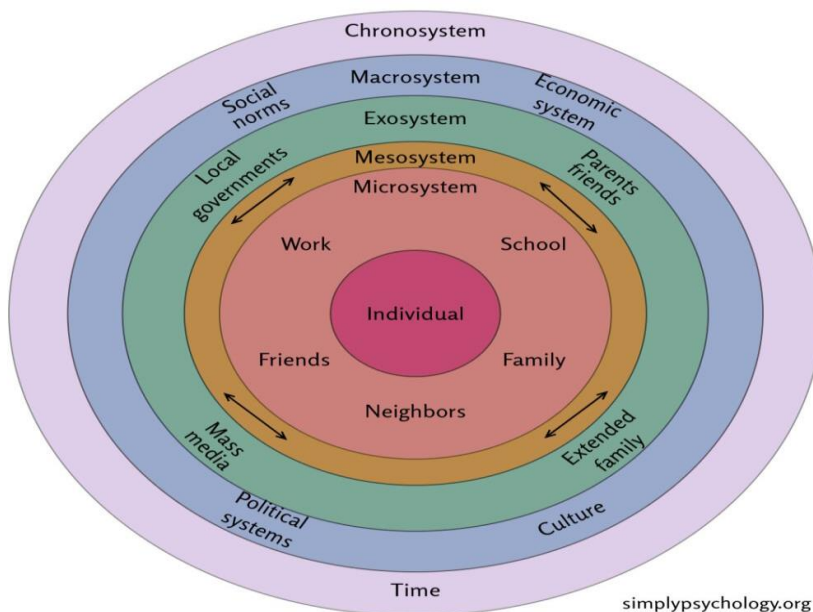
Ecological Systems Theory (EST) interprets human behaviour by examining the interplay between individuals and their surrounding environment, emphasising how these environmental connections influence the primary forces driving psychological development (Crawford, 2020:2). Furthermore, it is the way through which social researchers attempt to give clarity and understanding to the interconnectedness of individuals with their environments (Crawford, 2020:2). It is thus essential to study the existence of youth in a variety of systems in a quest to comprehend their growth and transition. In conducting this study, the researcher therefore focused on all the multiple layers that influence the foster care placement, as well as the resulting factors that contribute to its breakdown once the youth leaves care.

Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979), who was an American psychologist, developed the Ecological Systems Theory to outline how one's surroundings impact their advancement, and this study draws upon it. Bronfenbrenner suggests that individuals must be viewed as comprising numerous interconnected systems, with their growth shaped by intricate interactions between the people and several systemic aspects that in turn mutually affect one another (Mabhoyi & Seroto, 2019:2). The EST emphasises that secure relationships are essential in mitigating the risk posed by surroundings that

are not conducive for development (Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022:3). Furthermore, even the most conducive environments need the presence of a loving relationship to facilitate mental stability and growth.

The adoption of the ecological system theory assisted the researcher in exploring the interdependence of family systems in the formation of strong, long-lasting relationships between the foster care family and the youth leaving care. Viewing the foster care family as a social system provided another angle from which to understand it and added reliability to familiar problems. It is crucial to understand how families support one another through the various systemic levels in order to formulate policies that will provide the best support for foster families (Piel, Geiger, Julien-Chinn & Lietz, 2017:1037).

Bronfenbrenner (1979) established that human beings exist in different systems; the researcher focused on four systems. These systems are presented by Guy-Evans (2020:2) as follows:



*Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory Model*

- **Microsystem**

In this system, the person interacts with their environment and the people in it. The microsystem encompasses immediate environments, such as family, school, and the

local community, which directly shape an individual's daily development and experiences (Mabhoyi & Seroto, 2019:2). Individuals or children may relate to their environments. In the case of this research study, this system includes the foster care family. It is in the foster care family that the fundamental needs of the foster care-leaver are addressed. Viewing the foster family as a microsystem helped the researcher to understand how the system influenced the process of development and leaving care for the foster care-leaver. Smith (2015:69) indicates that positive surroundings enhance growth amidst challenges, and the youth is able to thrive.

- **Mesosystem**

This system refers to the way in which diverse but interrelated components of a person's microsystem function collectively to promote the person's well-being and development (Mabhoyi & Seroto, 2019:2). These relationships are bi-directional in that the way that one treats another person influences how others in turn treat them and can have an influence on the individual's behaviour (Jamieson et al., 2017:34). This is the connection that the foster care-leaver has with their foster parents or caregivers and social workers, as well as their neighbourhood. These systems work together for either the success or instability within the foster care setting; because they are interconnected, they influence each other. On this level, most people in the general public have their families of origin for social support; some even have access to community support to avert negative developmental outcomes.

- **Exosystem**

The exosystem encompasses the broader society. This incorporates individuals who are not involved in direct interaction with the child, yet still exert an influence on their development, for example, parents' workplaces, extended family members, and the neighbourhood (Mabhoyi & Seroto, 2019:3). On this level, relations occur within the community and thereby influence the children at home (Jamieson et al., 2017:34). The exosystem does not contain individuals at its centre, but the influence is still reciprocal. One example would be how a parent comes back home from work feeling stressed; this will affect the children at home even though they are not part of the workplace (Crawford, 2020:2). In this study the researcher investigated what happens when a foster parent stops receiving the foster care grant; this is a policy issue but has an

impact of how the foster care-leaver will fare in life. The foster parent's earnings also have an impact on how the family lives, as it affects the children's education, their vacations, or extra-mural activities.

- **Macrosystem**

The macrosystem comprises broader societal structures and entities, that, while detached from the child's immediate environment, significantly influence their development; these include elements such as economic conditions, governmental policies, cultural values, traditions, and legal frameworks within the children's communities (Mabhoyi & Seroto, 2019:2). The policies dictate how services are rendered to individuals and groups in society and, in turn, shape the environment children live in even though they were not directly set for them (Jamieson et al., 2017:34). The state has the duty to protect all its citizens, especially the vulnerable groups, which includes the youth leaving care. Hence, it was important for the researcher to understand the interconnectedness of these systems in the life of a foster care-leaver and their foster parents. These systems include the Welfare Organisations, all social service professionals, foster parents, and all the other systems available to the youth leaving care.

### **3.2 Ubuntu**

Ubuntu is a concept that originated from sub-Saharan Africa, and it entails everything that makes up the value and worth of a human being (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2019:28). The White Paper for Social Welfare defines Ubuntu as a practice wherein people care for one another, and reciprocal support is fostered. Thus, this principle asserts that individual humanity is ideally conveyed through mutual relations (Republic of South Africa, 1996:12). The other African meaning of Ubuntu spirals down to the care of a child, and this principle asserts that children belong to the community, thus, the duty to care for the child can be assumed by any adult in the community in the absence of their biological parents (Radebe & Phooko, 2017:240). The researcher understands Ubuntu as the philosophy that declares that people's existence and thriving is interdependent. This theory helped the researcher in understanding the lives of foster care-leavers and the challenges they face as they leave care in the context of mutual existence.

The commonly recognised principles of Ubuntu are as follows; “*I am because we are*” and “*a person is a person through other persons;*” these principles uphold the value of human relationships (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2019:28). This submits that, the character of children is developed by means of their interaction with others, likewise with all other family member (Metz, 2016:324). As Van Breda (2018:8) has noted, social connectiveness fosters resilience and is significant in building one’s character. Furthermore, the notion of autonomy and independence by the liberal theorists, is diffused by the Ubuntu theory, as it asserts the co-existence and interdependence of human beings within all structures of society (Van Breda, 2019:441).

Ubuntu is considered a unique African concept of keeping the communal idea of human interrelation (Tladi, 2021:145). One other principle – “*it takes a village to raise a child*” – loosely translated, it takes the involvement of all community structures to build valuable members of the public. Intriguingly, adults are significant role players in the establishment of conducive settings for the development of a child (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2019:28). Again, from this theory, the researcher gathered the importance of having a family as the support structure for a person to realise their full potential. When youth that has turned 21 years leave care, they are left to fend for themselves, thereby compromising the ability to self-actualise, as they now have no family structure or adult support. Next, the researcher discusses the guiding principles of Ubuntu.

- **Solidarity** – this refers to the combined efforts by the community to ensure the survival of all in the community and giving mutual aid to achieve common goals (Makau & Ngubane, 2021:5; Azage, Ogieriakhi & Ikpeazu, 2023:187). This guiding principle is explained by Radebe and Phooko (2017:241) as a Zulu saying, *izandla ziyagezana*, translated as one hand washes another. The example they cite to connote this is that of community members standing together to support a bereaved family without expecting compensation.
- **Coexistence** – this is another fundamental principle of Ubuntu, which promotes living in harmony with one another and accepting each other’s differences (Makau & Ngubane, 2021:5). This also speaks to communal harmony and social cohesion (Azage et al., 2023:187).
- **Compassion** – this means the ability of a community to feel for one another by sharing and showing sympathy towards one another. This principle underpins the need for societies to promote friendliness and compassion towards one

another (Coleman, 2021:10). This principle further reveals, “I cannot have all while you don’t have anything” (Makau & Ngubane, 2021:6). This will, in turn, foster interconnectedness among the community members (Azage et al., 2023:187).

- **Respect and dignity** – this is another important principle of Ubuntu, which is also a fundamental societal value that encourages treatment of members with dignity and respect, as this will encourage trust within the community (Makau & Ngubane, 2021:6). By embracing diversity, and acknowledging the inherent worth of every individual, communities can foster understanding and tolerance (Azage et al., 2023:187).

Using these two theoretical frameworks provided a strong base to examine the plight of foster parents and youth who have left care. In addition, by integrating the Ecological Systems Theory and Ubuntu, the researcher could better understand the multifaceted influences on the relationship breakdown between foster parents and foster care-leavers. This approach emphasises the importance of considering not only the immediate interactions but also the broader social and cultural context. It also emphasises the need for continued community support, which is central to the philosophy of Ubuntu, to prevent such breakdowns and to support foster care-leavers in their journey towards independence.

## **CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **4.1 Introduction**

Research methodology refers to the scientific study of research. It comprises systems that provide a solution to the research problem through following logical steps (Patel & Patel, 2019:48). A research methodology encompasses a systemic approach used to explore particular phenomena, events, or experiences within the social realities of individuals who are of relevance to the researcher (Chivanga & Monyai, 2021:12). From the definitions provided above, the researcher deduces that research methodology is about the process to be followed in conducting a research enquiry.

It is significant for the researcher to select a research methodology according to the research problem, because the method will help the study to yield the results the researcher wishes to acquire (Chivanga & Monyai, 2021:12). The researcher recognises that the research methodology is important because it gives a plan of the sequence to be followed by the investigation to arrive at the desired end. This chapter will unpack the research methodology applied to this study; this includes the research approach, designs, paradigm, and methods. This segment will also discuss the ethical considerations and limitations of the study.

### **4.2. Research approach**

The study applied the qualitative research approach, as the data was collected by focusing on exploring the causes of foster care breakdown when the foster care-leaver has turned 21 years of age. As suggested by the name, this approach commonly studies human behaviour following the qualitative process (Patel & Patel, 2019:49). Essentially, the researcher is the main data collection tool; thus, the qualitative research approach is a method for discovering and capturing meaningful insights while collecting data, and giving answers why events occur (Teherani, Martimianakis, Stenfors-Hayes, Wadhwa & Varpio, 2015: 669).

The qualitative research approach prioritises the expression of emotions, insights, and lived experiences over their quantification (Teherani et al., 2015:669). This method aligned with the exploratory nature of this research, enabling the use of open-ended, semi-structured, and flexible methods of inquiry. It also facilitates a full comprehension of meanings participants attribute to the phenomenon under investigation, as situated

within their real-life context (Chivanga & Monyai, 2021:13). Adopting the qualitative research method was important to the researcher since the focus of the study was on the perceived realities of participants.

Chivanga and Monyai (2021:13) reported that the qualitative method allows researchers to apply inductive reasoning to interpret participants' responses and comments. The application of a qualitative approach provided the participants with the opportunity to communicate their lived experiences as the foster care placement broke down and share the processes they have undergone as they were preparing to exit the foster placement structure.

Below is a discussion of the characteristics of qualitative research methodology adopted by Anas and Ishaq (2022:91), and by Creswell and Creswell (2018:257-258).

- **Natural setting:** Research and the collection of data take place within a geographic context, timeframe, and practices as directly shaped by participants themselves (Anas & Ishaq, 2022:91). Information is collected directly where the subjects experience the issue that is being investigated; participants are not taken to a laboratory (Creswell & Creswell, 2018:257). In this study, data were gathered at the participants' homes.
- **Researcher as participant/ Researcher as a key instrument:** The role of the researcher is viewed as that of a participant who makes a valuable contribution to the study (Anas & Ishaq, 2022:91). The meaning of this is that the non-verbal and verbal language of the researcher adds significantly to the research. The researcher asked open-ended questions which helped to the researcher to achieve dual participation.
- **Multiple methods:** Qualitative researchers do not rely on one source of data; data is gathered in a variety of ways, including observations, documents, and interviews (Creswell & Creswell, 2018:257). The researcher collected comprehensive data based on all forms of communication by the participants, and that data was analysed to form common themes.
- **Complex reasoning through inductive and deductive logic:** In this phase, the researcher applies advanced reasoning skills at various stages of the

research project (Creswell & Creswell, 2018:257). In the data collected, the researcher arranged common topics that stood out as the data was sifted and came to a logical conclusion.

- **Participants' meanings:** The explanations provided by participants of their issues bring unique and diverse views to the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018:258). The meaning that subjects attribute to a certain subject matter is what is crucial at this stage, furthermore, participants are permitted to regulate themes of discussion (Anas & Ishaq, 2022:91).
- **Emergent design:** This means the research plan must be flexible and can be adjusted throughout the stages of the research according to the needs of the research study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018:258). The researcher was flexible enough to discern the angle the process is taking and adjusted accordingly.
- **Reflexivity:** The researcher brings an awareness of how their professionalism or work influences how they filter data collected (Creswell & Creswell, 2018:258). The work experience of the researcher is brought into how the information is translated.
- **Holistic account:** The researcher is not confined to rigid cause-and-effect relationships between variables; they focus on uncovering the intricate interplay of factors within a given context (Creswell & Creswell, 2018:258). The focus of the researcher was on the holistic picture, not just fragments of the data; this included forming an understanding based on context and perceptions.

The researcher was intentional about adopting the qualitative research approach and had a chance to ask participants questions about the causes of relationship breakdown between the foster parent(s) and foster care-leaver(s) when they reached the age of 21. In addition, the researcher had an opportunity to listen attentively to the responses of the participants. Furthermore, subjects of the study were afforded a chance to share their lived stories on the causes of the relationship breakdown between the foster parent(s) and foster care-leavers after reaching the age of 21.

### **4.3. Research paradigm**

Positivism and interpretivism are generally the prevalent paradigms in research. Positivism maintains that the existence of reality is independent of human perception; it is not shaped by sensory experiences and operates according to fixed universal laws (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016:53). Interpretivism, on the other hand, does not accept the view that one, demonstrable reality occurs outside human determination (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016:55). The researcher adopted the constructivist/interpretivist paradigm for this study.

- **Constructivist/interpretivist paradigm**

Interpretivist researchers take the stance that reality is socially constructed based on people's own experiences of their world (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016:55; Kumatongo & Muzata, 2021:18). They, therefore, assert that it is impossible to comprehend what reality is because it is facilitated by our subjective perceptions of our environments. The researcher intends to understand the issue being studied through the eyes of the partakers in the study and not those of the researcher. This paradigm is relevant to this study since the research was about exploring and comprehending the realities as well as the insights of foster care-leavers. The focus was on understanding their lived experiences and their interpretation of their world concerning the causes that led to relationship breakdown. Interpretivism tries to understand the interpretations individuals attribute to the social phenomena they interact with (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016:55).

### **4.4. Research design**

Lal Das (2017:43) refers to a research design as a structured plan outlining the overall strategy and processes for undertaking a research project, which is most likely to be changed by new aspects, new conditions, and new relations between variables, as it progresses; simply put, it is a clear strategy for conducting research. Chivanga and Monyai (2021:11) define research design as a systematic process for collecting and analysing data derived from appropriate materials deemed as relevant for addressing the objectives of the study. The researcher, therefore, understands a research design to be a plan outlining the steps the researcher will follow in conducting the study. The plan must allow flexibility, since it is a guide for the research, and therefore it must not

be rigid. Patel and Patel (2019:51) emphasise the importance of applying a flexible research plan when conducting a research study for exploration. Akhtar (2016:71) adds that a research design is essential because it ensures the application of several research strategies for a professional research study, while ensuring efficient use of resources such as time, effort, and financial resources. The explorative, descriptive, and contextual research designs were adopted for this study.

#### **4.4.1. Explorative research design**

The exploratory studies seek to formulate a problem for a more precise investigation (Lal Das, 2017:44). This research formulated a base of knowledge to be expanded on by other researchers. Akhtar (2016:71) states that the application of the explorative research design is relevant when there are inadequate resources to be used as references. There is limited information regarding the plight of foster parents and foster care-leavers in South Africa, as most of the literature on foster care instability focuses on placement disruption during childhood. However, less attention has been given to relational breakdown occurring after youth exit statutory care. In addition, little is known of the causes of relationship breakdown between the foster parent(s) and foster care-leaver(s) once they reach the age of 21.

#### **4.4.2. Descriptive research design**

Both Lal Das (2017:45) and Akhtar (2016:75) concur that descriptive studies correctly detail the features of the participants to be investigated in a study. Furthermore, a descriptive study may be concerned with the attitude or views of the participants (Akhtar, 2016:76). The researcher studied the lived experiences of foster care-leavers who have turned 21 and foster parents, and the causes of foster care breakdown within foster families. The problem statement was outlined using this research design to highlight the need for this research study.

#### **4.4.3. Contextual research design**

Duda, Warburton, and Black (2020:2) assert that the nature of contextual research design is subjective, and it is driven by the perspective of the researcher to solicit the most relevant information and understanding of the needs of participants. The researcher conducted the study in the participants' location in order to understand their experiences within their context. Duda et al. (2020:4) further state that observing

participants in their environment produces dependable evidence regarding their experiences or circumstances.

## **4.5. RESEARCH METHODS**

Chivanga and Monyai (2021:12) explain that a research method is the specific procedure applied to carry out a research study. They further advise that the selection of research methods must align with the research problem to ensure the development of suitable research instruments and the generation of data that is contextually relevant to the study (Chivanga & Monyai, 2021:12). The following segment focuses on the description of the research population, the sampling methods to be used, the data collection, and the data analysis procedures employed in this research project.

### **4.5.1. Research population**

The research population is the specific group of individuals who are the main focus of the study (Majid, 2018:3). Furthermore, a population is the group of people or sampling units that are relevant to a particular research problem (Chivanga & Monyai, 2021:13). In this research project, the targeted population comprises young adults aged 21 to 26 who have exited the foster care system in the Ekurhuleni region (also called, the Eastern Corridor) in Gauteng Province, along with the foster parents who previously provided care for the foster care-leaver. Majid (2018:3) further states that it is essential to designate the demographic features of the group to be studied. A sample of the population was selected for this study, and there were eligibility criteria that all participants had to meet in order to be included in this study. This is discussed under the section on sampling methods.

### **4.5.2. Sampling**

Majid (2018:3) defines sampling as the procedure for choosing a group of individuals who accurately represent the larger population under investigation to participate in the study. It is considered a crucial component of research methodology, as including the entire population is often impractical due to its size. Chivanga and Monyai (2021:13) concur that sampling entails identifying individuals who reflect the characteristics of the broader target population, thereby enabling the researcher to collect relevant and comprehensive information related to the research topic. The sample for this study followed a criterion called data saturation. Data saturation refers to a stage in data

collection wherein a researcher decides to stop collecting field data because no new themes are emerging from the new data, meaning that no additional data are being found (Saunders, Sim, Kingstone, Baker, Waterfield, Bartlam, Burroughs & Jinks, 2018:1895). Furthermore, no new insight is derived from the new data, the patterns remain the same as the data already collected (Given, 2016:135). The research study's sample should be significantly large to ensure that the result of the study is not attributed to random variation within the target population (Majid, 2018:5). Although full thematic analysis was conducted after completion of all the fieldwork, ongoing reflection and review of interview data during data collection enabled the researcher to monitor redundancy and determine the point of saturation. After the sixth participant, saturation began to emerge. However, two more interviews were conducted to ensure that no new themes would emerge. Both participant categories were purposefully recruited because they experienced similar outcomes in foster care.

#### **4.5.3. Sampling methods**

A sampling method is a definite plan predetermined by the researcher to select relevant participants from a larger population of study (Patel & Patel, 2019:51). In this research project, a non-probability sampling technique was applied to select participants for the study. One advantage of the non-probability sampling techniques is that it allows the researcher to exclude individuals unlikely to contribute relevant data, thereby minimising research costs and focusing only on participants deemed most appropriate for addressing the objectives of the study (Chivanga & Monyai, 2021:13). A purposive sample was drawn from non-probability sampling in this research study. Purposive sampling is built on the premise that, with good judgement, one can select the sample units that are most satisfactory as per the requirements of their study (Lal Das, 2017:65). It also helps one to get controllable amount of data while limiting the possibility of having irrelevant participants forming part of the study (Ames, Glenton & Lewin, 2019:6). In summary, it gives the researcher control with regards to the inclusion criteria of participants of the study.

For the purposes of this investigation, the researcher approached the Department of Social Development (DSD) in the Gauteng Province for the purpose of collecting data. The DSD was regarded as playing a critical role in ensuring that data is gathered from

both the foster parents and foster care-leavers. The researcher asked for a list of foster parents and foster care-leavers from the DSD database.

The selection criteria for the participants who were included in this research study were as follows:

- Foster care-leavers between the ages of 21 and 26 years.
- Foster care-leavers who were willing to take part in the study.
- Foster care-leavers who had been in foster care for a minimum of two years.
- Participants were expected to be diverse in terms of gender and race.
- Foster care-leavers residing within the Ekurhuleni Region.

The selection criteria for the foster parents who were included in this research study were as follows:

- Foster parents who had been appointed for a minimum of two years as foster parents.
- A foster parent who had fostered a youth who had left care and who was between the ages of 21 and 26 years.
- Participants were expected to be diverse in terms of gender and race.
- Foster parents residing within the Ekurhuleni Region.

The criteria for the foster care leavers who were excluded from this research study were as follows:

- Foster care-leavers under the age of 21 years and above the age of 26 years.
- Foster care-leavers who had been in care for less than two years.
- Foster care-leavers who were not willing to be part of the study.
- Foster care-leavers residing outside the Ekurhuleni Region.

Below were the exclusion criteria for foster parents:

- Foster parents who had fostered a foster care-leaver for less than two years.
- Foster parents who did not have a foster care-leaver between the ages of 21 and 26 years.
- Foster parents who were not willing to be part of the study.
- Foster parents residing outside the Ekurhuleni Region.

The researcher first informed the Regional Director of the Ekurhuleni Region about the intended study to get approval to conduct the study. The social workers in different service offices identified participants meeting the criteria of the study from their database and helped the researcher to access them. A list containing the participants' demographic information and contact details was compiled. Participants were then contacted via telephone, introduced to the researcher, and informed about the purpose of the study. The participants were also required to give consent to participate. It was only after they gave a verbal agreement that interview appointments were arranged and consents were signed. Interviews took place at the sites that were suitable for the participants.

#### **4.5.4. Data collection**

Creswell and Creswell (2018:262) conceptualise data collection as a sequence of interrelated tasks designed to obtain high-quality information that effectively addresses the research questions. According to Patel and Patel (2019:52), there are two ways of collecting data, that is, through obtaining primary data and secondary data. The researcher obtained primary data from participants through the interviews. The researcher developed an interview guide to assist her in maintaining a consistent line of inquiry, while also allowing participants the flexibility to articulate their personal perspectives, beliefs, and viewpoints, as affirmed by Chivanga and Monyai (2021:13). The steps to follow when preparing for data collection are discussed below.

##### **4.5.4.1. Preparation for data collection**

It is important to first get participants for the study and to **gain access and establish rapport** with them in order for them to freely share their experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018:262). Furthermore, qualitative research entails selecting a research

site and obtaining approval to access it in a manner that facilitates effective data collection. In this study, the researcher sought authorisation and ethical clearance from the University of South Africa (UNISA), College of Human Sciences Research and Ethics Committee, and approval by the Regional Director of the Ekurhuleni region, and Gauteng Department of Social Development's Head of Department to conduct this study in the district. Written consent from participants was obtained after a detailed explanation was given to them regarding what the study entails.

The researcher applied ***purposeful sampling*** in this study. The researcher must be intentional in sampling individuals that would give the best information regarding the phenomenon under investigation; thus, the researcher needs to select a suitable method for purposive sampling (Creswell & Creswell, 2018:262). The participants who were included in the study were intentionally selected. There are criteria that participants need to meet for them to form part of the study. On the ***Forms of data***, the researcher used observations and documentation, conducted semi-structured interviews, audio-recorded the interviews, and transcribed the interviews, according to the recommendation by Creswell and Creswell (2018:262).

***Field issues:*** Creswell and Creswell (2018:262) identified potential field-related challenges, such as not having sufficient data, the risk of losing valuable evidence, and having to leave the research site earlier than anticipated. The researcher was mindful that participants might be reluctant to participate in the study, especially if they are not buying into the purpose of the study.

***Store data:*** One needs to ensure that data is not destroyed and lost by storing it in a safe but accessible place (Creswell & Creswell, 2018:262). The researcher stored the recorded and transcribed data in a safe place to maintain confidentiality.

#### **4.5.4.2. Methods of data collection**

According to Chivanga and Monyai (2021:13), qualitative research employs various methods of collecting data. For this study, interviews were chosen as the main method for collecting data. Interviews are described as a process of engagement wherein the researcher presents questions and collects responses directly from participants through a mutual engagement (Lal Das, 2017:84).

There are two main categories of interviews, that is, structured and semi-structured. The researcher employed face-to-face semi-structured interviews to conduct this research project. This approach allows for a flexible yet focused line of questioning, where all participants were presented with the same core questions, while also permitting follow-up probes for clarification (Chivanga & Monyai, 2021:14). In addition, Megaldi and Berler (2020:4826) state that this type of interview is investigative in nature and is commonly applied in qualitative research studies. They further emphasise that semi-structured interviews enable one to go in-depth into the topic to get a breakthrough. Ruslin, Mashuri, Abdul Rasak, Alhabsyi, and Syam (2022:24) further add that the semi-structured interview offers researchers the advantage of seeking elaboration and deeper insight, ensuring that participants' responses are well understood and aligned with the study objectives. Thus, the researcher formulated an interview schedule that comprised open-ended questions to explore participants' experiences in greater depth.

#### **4.6. Pilot testing**

Pilot testing is a preliminary research procedure that is concerned with increasing the research quality of the study, and it serves to evaluate the feasibility of the research process, particularly in terms of its practical implementation, bearing in mind the logistics about time, cost, and resource allocation before the full-scale study (Malmqvist, Hellberg, Gunvie Mollas, Rose & Shevlin, 2019:2). The researcher conducted small-scale trial research to pilot test the research project. The researcher went through the whole research plan using the first two participants, applying the strategic research method to gauge its functionality in achieving the desired goal. The two participants who formed the pilot testing did not form part of the main study.

#### **4.7. Methods of data analysis**

Data analysis is used to prepare data as a model where the relationship between the variables can be studied (Lal Das, 2017:108). It is a process that follows right after the researcher has collected data (Patel & Patel, 2019:52). In essence, data analysis entails systematically organising the data, segmenting it into manageable units, applying codes, and interpreting the findings to develop an in-depth knowledge of the subject under investigation (Chivanga & Monyai, 2021:14). The aim of data analysis is to facilitate the researcher's use of the data to draw informed conclusions within the

confines of policy so that judgement can be made for the benefit of the research project.

The researcher utilised the thematic analysis to analyse data. According to Braun and Clarke (2006:79), thematic analysis offers a flexible and effective technique for examining data that is rich in detail and complexity. This approach applies to data from interviews for the identification, organisation, and interpretation of recurring themes within the participants' responses (Vaismoradi, Jones, Turunen & Snelgrove, 2016:101). The researcher adopted Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework for thematic analysis, as outlined by Byrne (2021:1398-1410), to guide the systemic processing of the data collected.

- **Familiarisation with the data:** Familiarisation entailed reading the data repeatedly to enhance the researcher's understanding of the data. In the process, initial codes were generated before the recording was transcribed through thorough listening to the recording.
- The second step entailed **coding the data**. The researcher deemed coding as a significant process that precedes the identification of themes. Thus, in this step, data was labelled and organised to clearly see recurring patterns and the connection thereof.
- **Searching for themes:** The coding of all the important data was concluded before the identification of themes. The process went beyond just summarising the information to deriving meaning from the participant's views. The patterns identified from the coded data were revised to identify similar perceptions of participants that could be divided into themes.
- **Reviewing themes:** The researcher critically evaluated whether the emerging themes were aligned with the coded data and if they adequately addressed the research questions.
- **Defining and naming themes:** The researcher carefully refined and analysed each theme for its significance and appropriately labelled them to reflect their relevance to the study.

- **Reporting:** This stage involved synthesising an analytical narrative supported by illustrative data extracts. The outcomes of the study were contextualised with reference to the research questions and objectives, and integrated with insights from the literature review, resulting in a research report.

#### **4.8. Methods of data verification**

Trustworthiness is a procedure applied in qualitative research to ensure the credibility, confirmability, transferability, and dependability of the data. Thus, verifying qualitative data involves systematically evaluating the correctness and authenticity of the research results by adhering to established procedures and applying relevant evaluative criteria (Chivanga & Monyai, 2021:15). The researcher employed four key criteria, as outlined below, to achieve trustworthiness.

- **Credibility**

Credibility is described by the concepts of genuineness and accuracy, and this is where the researchers assess whether the research results are a reflection of the lived experiences and perceptions of the participants (Ghafouri & Ofoghi, 2016:1915). The transcripts were carefully reviewed to ensure accuracy and to identify and correct any potential errors that may have occurred during the transcription process. The researcher also applied proper observation methods as strategies to ensure credibility, as suggested by Haq, Rashid, Rasheed, and Akhter (2023:155). The researcher used the participants and fellow researchers to establish the accuracy and credibility of the collected data.

- **Dependability**

The notion of dependability means that the outcomes of the research are consistent over time, meaning the same research findings will be achieved in different conditions by a different researcher who pursues the same research (Ghafouri & Ofoghi, 2016:1917). Thus, to enhance dependability, the research process should be thoroughly documented to ensure that it can be replicated (Haq et al., 2023:159). The aspect of evaluation by fellow researchers is deemed as important in ensuring dependability (Stahl & King, 2020:27). Therefore, the researcher used another researcher, who signed a confidentiality statement, to read and react to the field notes taken, with their embedded researcher interpretations. This helped to confirm the

results as interpreted by the researcher. Stahl and King (2020:27) expand that peer debriefing or peer examination are solid communication habits that generate trust. The results of this research project are consistent and can be repeated by using structured ways of collecting data.

- **Transferability**

In plain language, Ghafouri and Ofoghi (2016:1917) state that transferability suggests the extent to which the current research outcome can be appropriate for application in similar environments. Creswell and Creswell (2018:290) and Stahl and King (2020:27) concur that a comprehensive account of the research background, its participants, and outcome is essential to confirm transferability. To ensure transferability, the researcher made sure that an adequate sample size was taken; and also gave a complete overview of the background of the study, methods, participants, and data analysis to ensure relevance in other studies or situations. For this study, foster care-leavers above the age of 21 years and foster parents were included in the study.

- **Confirmability**

Confirmability implies having the same results at various times (Ghafouri & Ofoghi, 2016:1918). It involves ensuring that the data and the interpretations drawn from it are grounded in evidence and not merely the product of the researcher's subjective assumptions or bias (Korsyjens & Moser, 2018:122). The researcher kept a reflexive journal to record all occurrences during interactions with participants, along with personal observations as evidence for field work. Thus, the results of the study were informed primarily by the original responses of participants rather than being influenced by the researcher's personal motivation, interests, and bias (Haq et al., 2023:159).

#### **4.9. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Chivanga and Monyai (2021:15) state that research ethics are standards that give guidance to the researcher in maintaining ethical integrity and professional conduct throughout the research process within the social sciences. Cacciattolo (2015:55) emphasises that being aware of what constitutes ethical research is crucial to the proper execution of the study; thus, ethics are applied to safeguard participants and shield them from unwarranted strain. Therefore, ethics are the components that

safeguard the wellbeing of participants during a research study and maintain the validity of the research outcome. Cassiattolo (2015:56) further states that behaving unethically compromises the trustworthiness of the data produced by the researcher.

In conducting this research, the researcher was cognisant of the ethical principles to be adhered to, because human participants were involved. This study complied with the necessary ethical standards, and participants provided informed consent to take part in accordance with those standards. The following ethical issues were considered in this study.

- **Voluntary participation**

Weinbaum, Landree, Blumenthal, Piguado and Gutierrez (2019:19) emphasise that participants in the research study should do so of their own free will, without pressure from the researcher, and without being unduly influenced by incentives. Similarly, Chivanga and Monyai (2021:15) highlight the importance of informing participants that they can pull out from the study anytime with no penalties. The researcher was careful to ensure that participation in this research project was entirely voluntary and that no individuals were coerced into taking part. Given that the participants were foster care-leavers and foster parents who may have previously interacted with the researcher in a professional capacity (as a social worker involved in their cases), there was a potential risk that they might have felt a sense of obligation to participate. This possibility was considered, and appropriate measures were taken to mitigate any undue influence. The emphasis was placed on the fact that participants can pull out from the research study at any time.

- **Informed Consent**

To uphold the principle of informed consent, the researcher offered participants a detailed explanation of the purpose of the study, scope, and the expected duration (Chivanga & Monyai, 2021:15). Informed consent typically takes the form of a written text detailing key aspects of the research and secures participants' voluntary agreement to participate, before the study begins (Creswell & Creswell, 2018:147). Written permission was obtained from the Gauteng Department of Social Development to involve the participants in the study. Additionally, those who were involved in the study were furnished with complete details of the study through an informed consent

letter, which they were asked to read, complete, and sign. The letter clearly outlined the goal of the study, the research procedures, and the overall process involved in participation.

- **Confidentiality, Privacy, and Anonymity**

Chivanga and Monyai (2021:15) describe confidentiality as the pledge that is provided to participants that the data they share will be protected and not disclosed to any unauthorised individual. Cassiattolo (2015:65) concurs that confidentiality encompasses the management and storage of data and the determination of who can access it and what is shared with those who are not doing the study. This ethical duty was fulfilled by making sure that information obtained from the participants is protected from unauthorised access, use, disclosure, and modification. The information has only been shared with the direct supervisor.

Privacy, on the other hand, is concerned with regulating the information that is made public about research participants, and this pertains to managing the presentation of participants in the public sphere (Cassiattolo, 2015:64). The researcher took care to exclude any personally identifiable information, such as participants' names, from the final research report intended for publication. All collected data, including audio-recorded interviews, were securely stored. Upon conclusion of the study, the data were retained in a safe place within the University of South Africa in the Department of Social Work, as prescribed by policy.

Fleming and Zegwaard (2018:211) state that anonymity is a crucial step in ensuring that participants are protected from possible harm; it means that the identity of participants is unknown to the person conducting the research study. An example given is when the researcher is conducting a research study using anonymous surveys, where information identifying the participants is truly not known to the researcher. Hwang (2023:5) regards anonymity in a research study as the information that is irrevocably stripped of direct identifiers, and any risk of re-identification of individual participants is minimised considerably. The researcher made sure that after the research study had been conducted and results obtained, no information was able to be linked to any individual participant.

- **Avoidance of harm**

Fleming and Zegwaard (2018:211) state that avoidance of harm is the measure the researcher puts in place when considering the potential for harm of research participants, and is linked with the above ethical consideration, which is confidentiality, anonymity, and privacy. They went on to say that the approach used by the researcher to consider the potential of harm to research participants should be in a descending order, to eliminate, isolate, and minimise the risk, with the participants being completely informed of the risks involved. The researcher considered the total well-being of the participants, including the possibility of causing harm to their emotional and physical well-being, and necessary measures to eliminate any potential harm were put in place.

Chivanga and Monyai (2021:15) emphasise that researchers are ethically obligated to ensure that participants are protected from harm and to respect their rights throughout the research process. It is also imperative that researchers maintain transparency regarding the goal and objectives of the research project. The researcher ensured that personal information that might endanger the lives of the participants was eliminated in the study. The researcher maintained empathy throughout the interviews. The researcher was aware that mental harm is mostly unidentified. So, in dealing with such, the right of participants to withdraw from the study, should they feel any discomfort during questioning or at any stage of the project, was emphasised.

- **Debriefing of participants**

Verbeke, Krawczyk, Baeyens, Piasecky, and Borry (2023:127) state that debriefing is an essential service offered to research participants to reduce the potential of any stress or traumatic reactions when participants are sharing their experiences or listening to the experiences of others. Furthermore, debriefing is a vital part of a research project and is an ongoing procedure that is constantly oriented towards the research participants and what is happening during the study (Schwägele, Zürn, Lukosch & Freese, 2021:377). The researcher asserts that debriefing of participants is a way of ensuring that the mental state of research participants is protected through offering counselling that aims at easing the heaviness caused by participation in the study.

The goal of this research project was to examine the underlying causes of foster care breakdown following the youth's transition beyond the age of 21. The researcher made certain that participants were thoroughly informed regarding the interview procedures, including the overall aim of the study. It was anticipated that the research discussions might evoke emotions, since the relationship breakdown in families can cause hurt to both the foster care-leaver and the foster parent, so each participant was debriefed after every interview session, and that gave them an opportunity to deal with emotions on the spot. In addition, the researcher referred the affected participants to the debriefer for further debriefing or counselling.

#### **4.10. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

The limitations of the study mean the difficulties and constraints encountered while conducting the research, which may impact the outcomes and the interpretation of the findings (Akanle, Ademuson & Shittu, 2020:110). It is important that the researcher should reveal that a clear understanding of limitations is well known. The noted limitations are listed below:

- The sample size and number of participants who formed part of the study could be considered small; therefore, these are regarded as limited.
- The role of the researcher as a previous social worker within the Eastern Corridor may have influenced participants to feel obligated to take part in the study. However, efforts were made to mitigate this by clearly emphasising that participation was entirely voluntary.
- The case managers or social workers were not part of the study, and therefore, information on services rendered to foster care-leavers from their perspective might not be reflected.
- Lack of funding limited the geographical area to be covered and the sample size.
- There is a possibility that some foster care-leavers and their foster parents may not have expressed their views due to fear of being audio-recorded.

#### **4.11. REFLEXIVITY**

Reflexivity is defined as an ongoing process that takes place throughout the research study, through which researchers consciously critique and evaluate how subjectivity influences the process of the research study (Olmos-Vega, Stalmeijer, Varpio & Kahlke, 2023:242). Therefore, the researcher should acknowledge and engage with the research context by critically reflecting on their own characteristics and assessing how these may influence the course of collecting data and data analysis (Haq et al., 2023:168). The researcher was constantly aware of the interconnected personal and interpersonal factors and how these play a part in the research. The researcher was a social worker in the employment of the Department of Social Development before she was promoted to Social Work Supervisor; therefore, the researcher was aware that participants might feel obligated to disclose their personal details to the researcher even though they are uncomfortable with that, so they might feel obligated to because of the researcher's position. To mitigate this, the researcher explained her position to the participants and assured them that their involvement in the study was totally voluntary. The researcher acknowledges that the researcher's field of work played a role in the selection of this study. Olmos-Vega et al. (2023:244) encourage the researcher's awareness of interpersonal relationships between participants and the researcher. The researcher dealt with the preconceived assumptions on the foster care-leavers and foster parents' outcomes so that this research study could start on a clean slate.

#### **4.12 DISSEMINATION OF RESEARCH RESULTS**

González, Malmusi, Camprubí, and Borrell (2017:261) describe dissemination of research findings as the spreading of study outputs to potentially relevant audiences such as policymakers or the academic community. The outcomes for this research project are distributed publicly through a dissertation and will further be shared by publishing a scientific article in a peer-reviewed, accredited academic journal to add to the existing body of knowledge. The researcher compiled the report in a clear, objective, and transparent manner to ensure the accuracy of the presented results. Additionally, the outcome will be made available upon request to the Department of Social Development and the participants involved in the study.

## **CHAPTER 5: PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

### **5.1. Introduction**

The following section presents a discussion of the study's findings. It starts with the demographic information of all participants. The themes and sub-themes are then explored as key findings of the study through the semi-structured interview schedule. To attain the goal of this study, which is to "explore the causes of the relationship breakdown between foster parents and youths leaving care when they reach the age of 21," the objectives of this study are outlined below:

- To explore the causes of the relationship breakdown between foster parent(s) and youth(s) leaving foster care.
- To investigate social support services available for foster parent(s) and youth(s) leaving foster care.
- To examine the needs of the youth(s) leaving foster care and their foster parent(s).
- To explore services received by foster parents and foster care-leavers from social workers to strengthen family relationships.
- To provide recommendations on how to sustain the relationship between the foster parent(s) and youth(s) leaving foster care.

### **5.2 Demographic profile of the Participants**

Before the researcher could begin the data collection process, certain inclusion and exclusion criteria were considered. The selection criteria for the participants who were included in this research study are outlined below:

- Foster care-leavers whose age range from 21 to 26 years.
- Willingness to take part in the study.
- Have been in foster care for at least two years.
- Representation from diverse gender and racial backgrounds.
- Foster care-leavers residing within the Ekurhuleni Region.

The inclusion criteria for foster parents are as follows:

- Foster parents who have been appointed for a minimum of two years.
- Have fostered a youth who has since left care and is currently between the ages of 21 and 26 years.
- Representation from diverse gender and racial backgrounds.
- Foster parents residing within the Ekurhuleni Region.

Exclusion criteria for foster care-leavers:

- Foster care-leavers younger than 21 or older than 26 years of age.
- Foster care-leavers who spent less than two years in foster care.
- Foster care-leavers are unwilling to be part of the study.
- Foster care-leavers residing outside the Ekurhuleni Region.

Exclusion criteria for foster parents:

- Has fostered a foster care-leaver for less than two years.
- Foster parents who have not fostered a youth currently aged between 21 and 26 years.
- Foster parents who are not willing to be part of the study.
- Foster parents residing outside the Ekurhuleni Region.

The researcher will now present the profile of the sixteen (16) participants, namely, eight (8) foster care-leavers, followed by eight (8) foster parents residing in the Ekurhuleni Region, Gauteng Province. The demographic profiles of the foster care-leavers are outlined in Table 5.1:

**Table 5.1: Demographic profile of foster care-leavers**

No	Gender	Age	Highest Qualification	Period out of	Employment Status	Current situation	living

				<b>foster care</b>		
1.	Female	24	Grade 12 and university dropout	4	Employed	Backyard rental
2.	Female	22	Grade 12	1	Employed	Granny`s house
3.	Male	23	Grade 11	2	Unemployed	Shack rental
4.	Female	22	Grade 12	2	Student	Backyard rental
5.	Male	24	Grade 11	3	Unemployed	Backyard rental
6.	Female	23	Grade 11	2	Unemployed	Stays with a friend
7.	Female	25	Degree	5	Employed	Stays in an apartment
8.	Male	24	Grade 12	3	Unemployed	Stays with another family

### 5.2.1 Gender

Out of the eight (8) foster care-leavers who participated in this study, five (63%) were females, and three (37%) were males. The findings indicate that females constitute most participants in this research project. This aligns with data from Statistics South Africa (Stats SA), which reported that females make up more than 51.5% of the total population, while males account for 48.5% (Stats SA, 2022).

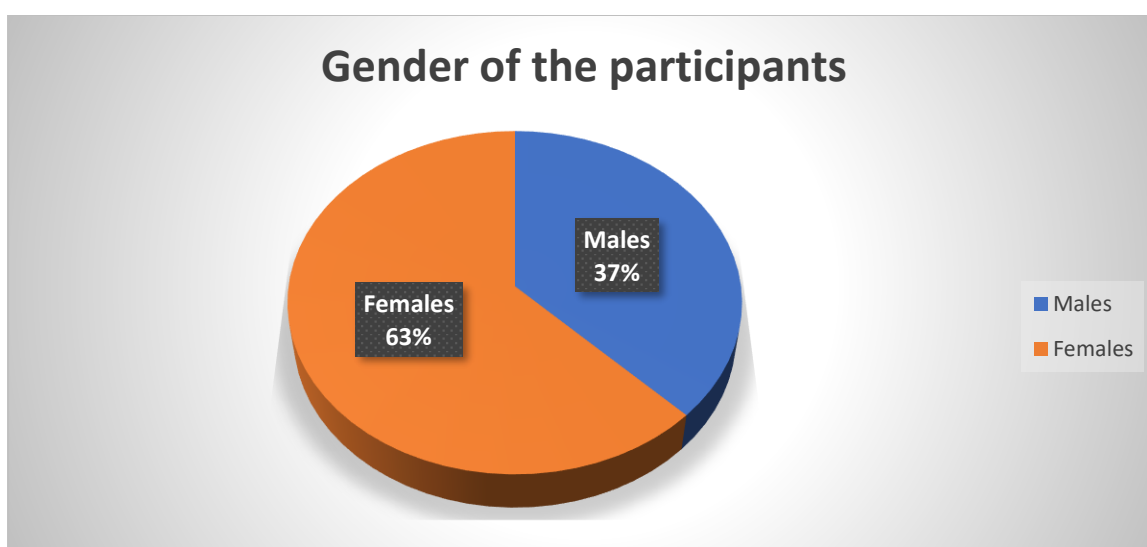


Figure 5.1: Gender of the participants (Foster care-leavers)

### 5.2.2 Age

The age distribution of participants was as follows: two participants were aged 21-22, five participants were aged 23-24, and one participant was aged 25-26. As a result, the majority of the participants were between the ages of 23 and 24. The majority of participants are at an age where they are finding their feet as foster care-leavers emerging to adulthood and beginning to establish independence, which makes support from their foster families crucial. However, studies indicate that many young people in this age group often transition into adulthood without sufficient preparation (Dziro, 2020:88).

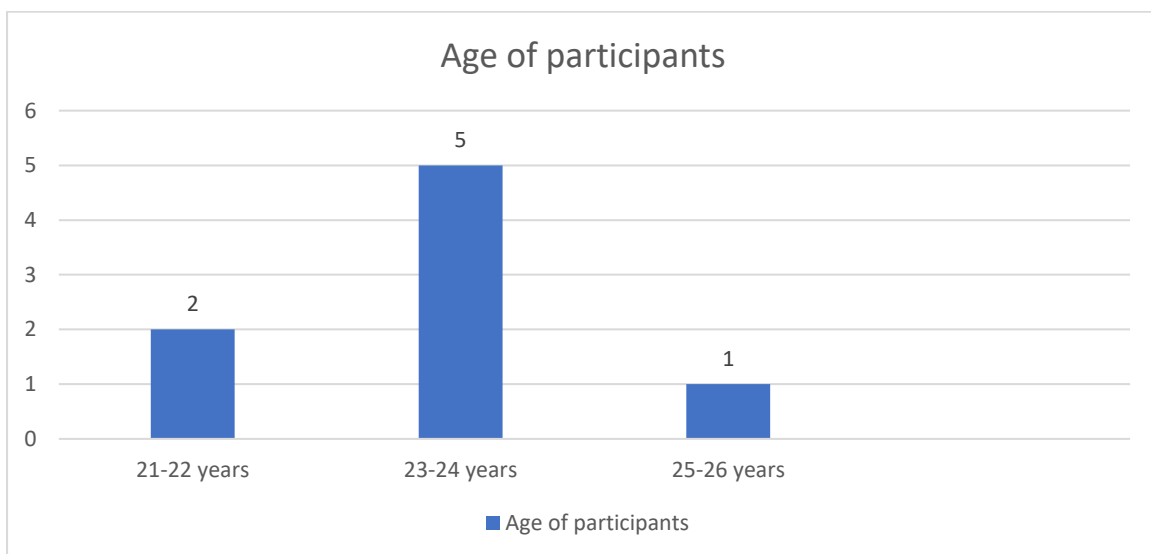


Figure 5.2: Age of the participants (Foster care-leavers)

### 5.2.3 Highest qualification

Literature reports that outcomes of care-leavers in education are generally poor (Bond, 2020:27). In this research study, 3 (37.5%) of the participants have completed grade twelve, 1 (12.5%) is a university dropout, and 3 (37.5%) have completed grade 11; 12.5% (1) has managed to complete a degree.

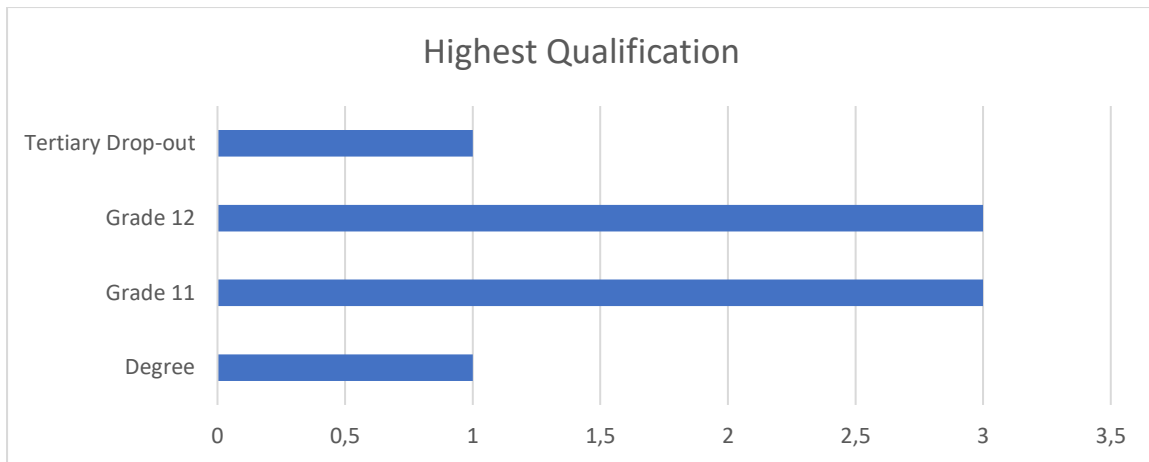


Figure 5.3: Highest qualification (foster care-leavers)

### 5.2.4 Period out of foster care

The participants included in this research project had all left foster care, in accordance with the study's inclusion criteria. The results show that 3 out of the 8 participants (37.5%) had been out of foster care for 2 years, two participants (25%) had exited care three years ago, one participant (12.5%) had been out of care for four years, another (12.5%) had exited one year ago, and the remaining participant (12.5%) had been out of foster care for five years. A larger portion of the foster care-leavers exited the system two years ago. This suggests that many left the foster care system relatively recently, and their circumstances while in care remain vivid and easily recalled.

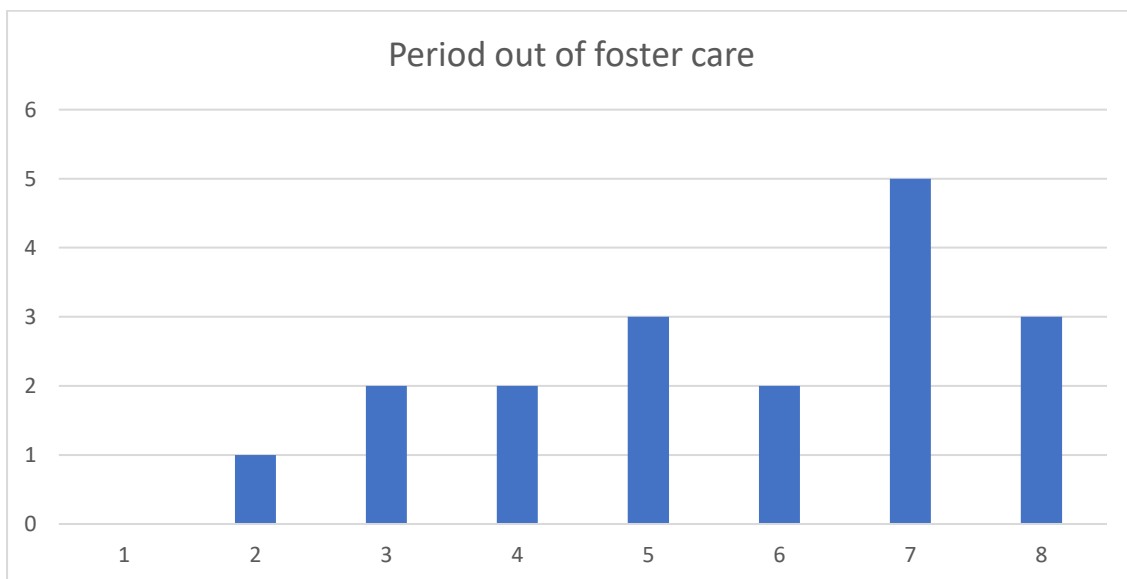


Figure 5.4: Period out of foster care

### 5.2.5 Employment status

Findings show that three of the participants (37.5%) were employed, while four of the participants (50%) were unemployed, and one (12.5%) is still a student. According to the study's results, unemployment was prevalent among most participants. This correlates with the findings of Dickens and Marx (2020:64), who reported unemployment as a challenge amongst youth transitioning to adulthood

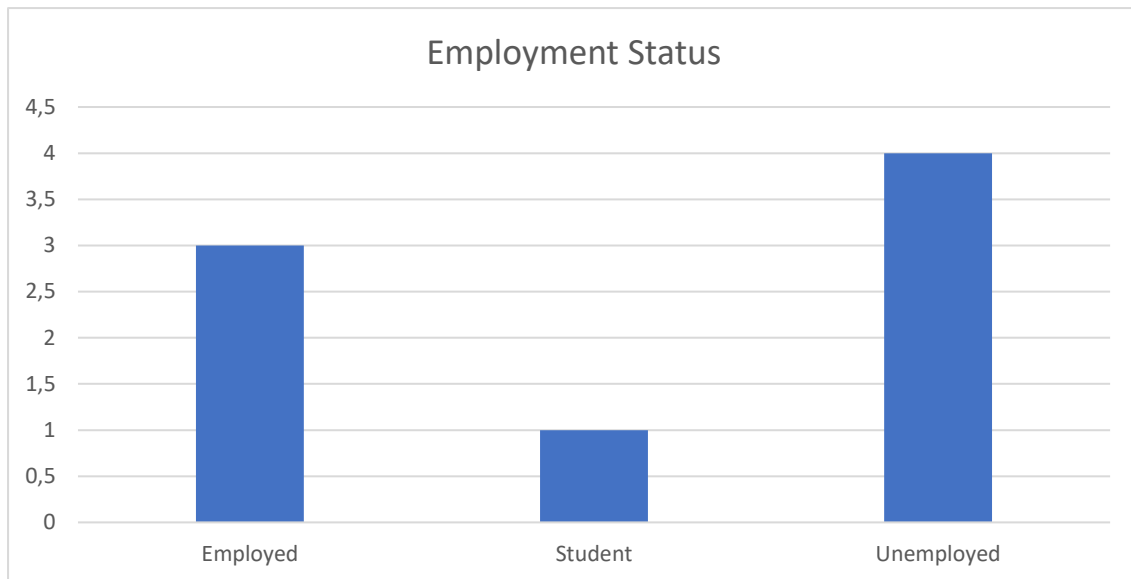


Figure 5.5: Employment status

### 5.2.6 Current living situation

The results show that three participants (37.5%) were renting backyard dwellings, one was living with a friend, and another with a family member. One participant was renting a shack, another was staying in their granny's house, and one was renting an apartment. None of the participants owned a house. This is consistent with Bond (2020:27), who highlighted that care-leavers often experience negative outcomes, particularly a lack of stable accommodation or housing.

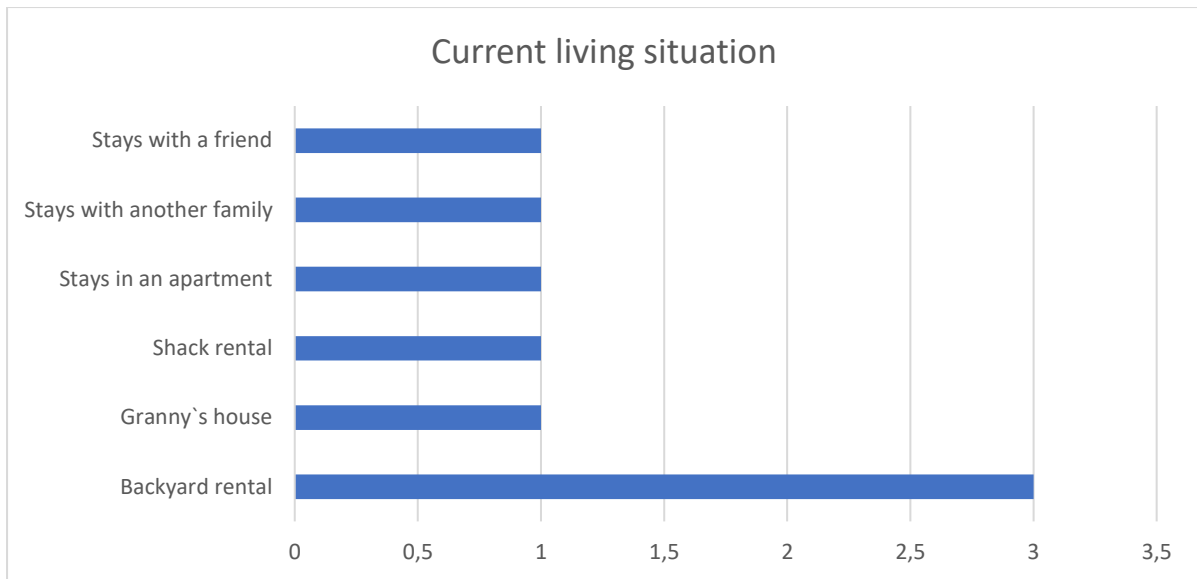


Figure 5.6: Current living situation

The analysis presented below is from the data gathered from the foster parents.

**Table 5.2: Demographic profile of foster parents**

No	Gender	Age	Marital Status	Highest Qualification	Period as a foster parent	Relationship with a foster care-leaver before turning 21
01.	Female	56 years	Married	Grade 09	8 years	Good
02.	Male	62 years	Married	Grade 11	6 years	Bad
03.	Female	72 years	Widow	Grade 7	10 years	Bad
04.	Female	61 years	Single	Grade 11	12 years	Bad
05.	Female	37 years	Life partner	Grade 12	7 years	Bad
06.	Female	70 years	Widow	Grade 08	12 years	Good
07.	Male	64 years	Married	Grade 09	7 years	Bad
08.	Female	46 years	Single	Grade 12	8 years	Bad

### 5.2.7 Gender

The gender of the eight participants was categorised as follows: two (25%) were males, and six (75%) were females. The findings indicate that females constitute most

participants in this research project. While females generally make up a larger percentage of the population, in this context, their predominance is likely due to the societal expectation that women often assume caregiving roles, combined with a high prevalence of female-headed households in South Africa (Revised White Paper for Families, 2023:8). Therefore, in the absence or loss of a significant other, women often assume the responsibility of caring for their dependants.

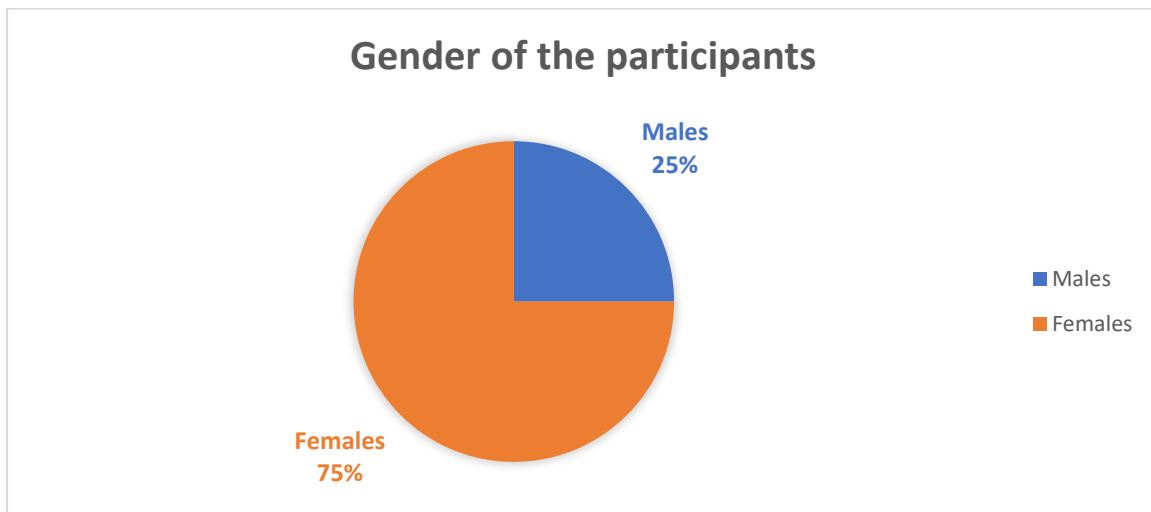


Figure 5.7: Gender of the participants (Foster parents)

### 5.2.8 Age

The ages of the participants who were part of the study ranged from 37 and 72 years. Among the eight participants, one was between 31 and 40 years, one between 41 and 50 years, and one between 51 and 60 years. Three participants were aged between 61 and 70 years, while two were over 70. None of the participants was between 21 and 30 years. The results show that a substantial number of foster parents were aged between 61 and 70 years. Therefore, the majority of participants are grandparents taking care of their grandchildren. This shows that grandparents often take on the role of primary caregivers in the absence of biological parents, and this is a trend observed across many parts of the world (Booys, Adendorff & Moodley, 2015:139).

### 5.2.9 Marital status

Three of the participants (37.5%) in this research project were married, two (25%) were widowed, and another two (25%) were single. One participant (12.5%) was in a relationship with a life partner. The outcomes reveal that the majority of foster parents

were married, although two were widowed. The participants who were previously married opted not to remarry, placing them in the category of single individuals. This corresponds with statistics showing a steady decline in marriage rates, potentially reflecting changing societal views on family structures (Preller, 2023). The acceptance of alternative family arrangements has reduced the societal pressure to marry (Preller, 2023).

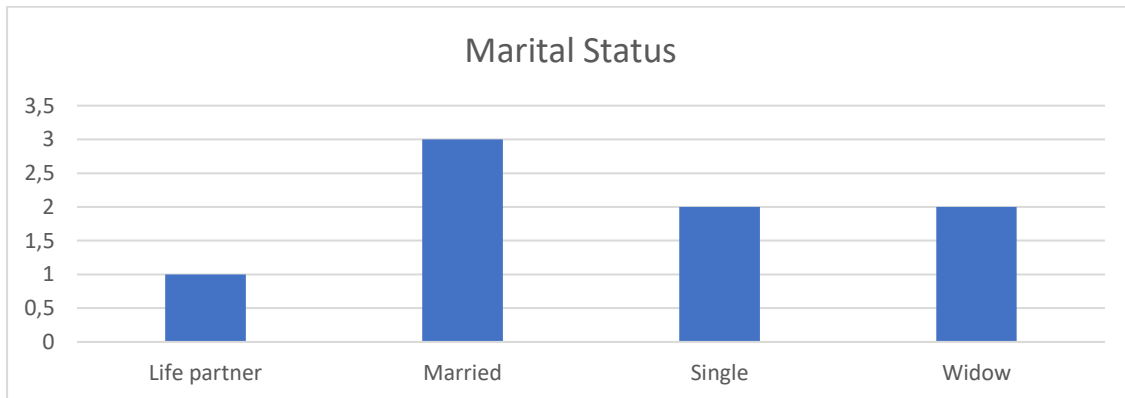


Figure 5.8: Marital Status

#### 5.2.10 Highest qualification

The educational outcomes of foster parents were generally unfavourable. This echoes the findings of Booy's et al. (2015:149), who noted that grandparents caring for their grandchildren typically had only primary or secondary education. Their limited educational background often restricted their ability to offer sufficient academic support, underscoring their own need for educational assistance. Most participants had reached high school level. Two participants (25%) had completed grade 12, another two (25%) had completed grade 11, and two (25%) had completed grade nine. Additionally, one participant (12.5%) ended their education at grade eight, while another one (12.5%) completed only up to grade seven in primary school.

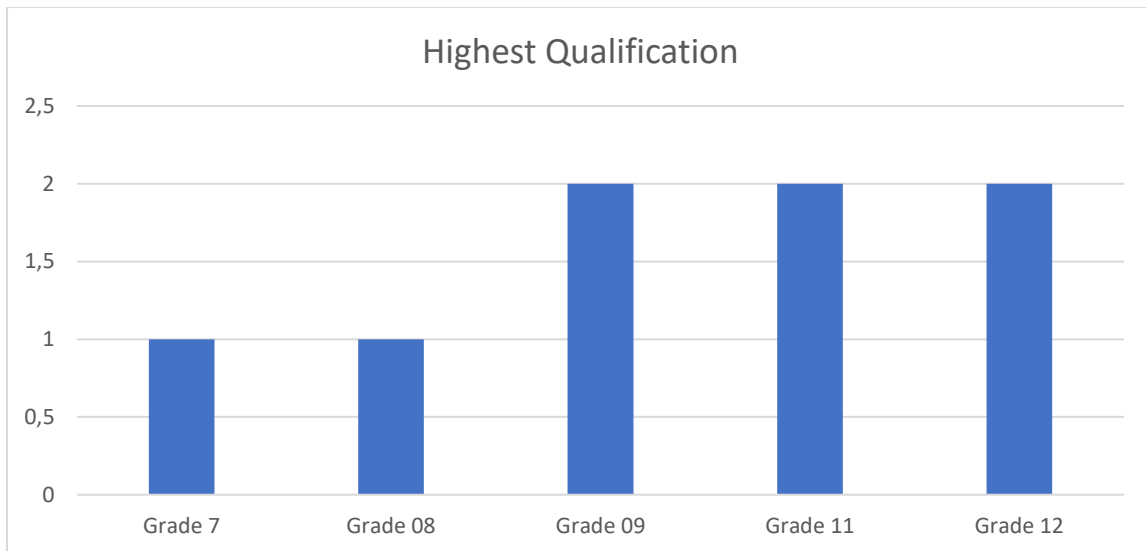


Figure 5.9: Highest qualification

### 5.2.11 Period as a foster parent

One of the inclusion criteria for participating in this study was that the foster parent should have fostered a foster care-leaver for a minimum of two years. Among the eight participants, two (25%) have been fostering for seven years, another two (25%) for eight years, and two (25%) have been fostering for twelve years, and one (12.5%) reported for ten years, while another one (12.5%) had six years of experience. All participants demonstrated extensive experience as foster parents, with none having fostered for less than five years.

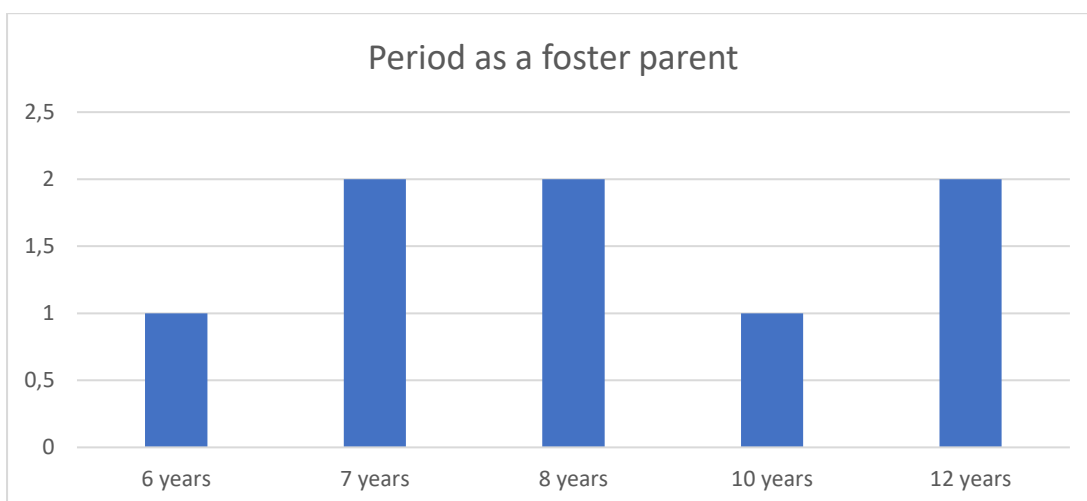


Figure 5.10: Period as a foster parent

### 5.2.12 Relationship with the foster care-leaver before turning 21

Of the eight participants, six (75%) reported having a poor relationship with the foster care-leavers, while two (25%) described their relationship as positive. This supports the notion that relationship breakdown is not an event, but a gradual process, as revealed in this study. The affection amongst foster parents and foster children develops over time, shaped by factors such as placement stability, the quality of caregiving, and the level of support provided (Mnisi & Botha, 2016:238). Notably, challenges in this relationship often develop gradually, yet interventions are usually implemented only when problems have escalated to a critical point (Mnisi & Botha, 2016:238).

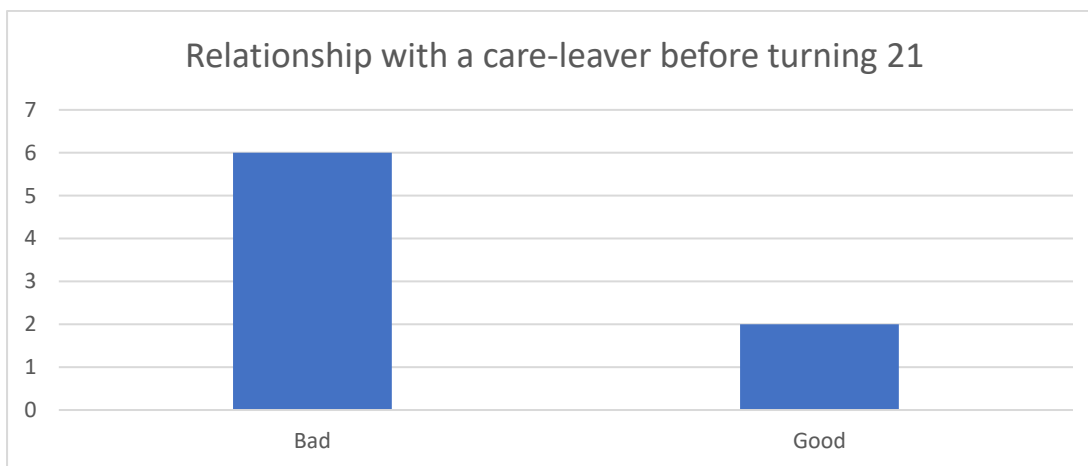


Figure 5.11: Relationship with a foster care-leaver before turning 21.

### 5.3 Key Themes

There are five core themes identified in this study: factors contributing to relationship breakdown, social support services, the needs of young people exiting care and their foster parents, Services received by foster parents and care-leavers from social workers to strengthen family relationships and prepare youth for independent living., and recommendations on how to maintain the relationship between the foster parent(s) and youth leaving foster care. Each of these themes includes several related sub-themes. The table below outlines the themes and sub-themes that were identified throughout the data collection process.

**Table 5.3: Themes and sub-themes**

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Sub-themes</b>
<b>Theme 1: Factors contributing to relationship breakdown between foster parents and foster care leavers</b>	1.1 Abuse of foster care-leavers by foster parents 1.2 External influence of foster care-leavers 1.3 Financial problems 1.4 Behaviour of foster care-leaver 1.5 Substance abuse by foster care-leaver 1.6 Family dynamics leading to conflicts 1.7 Lack of discipline by foster parents to foster care-leavers 1.8 Foster care-leavers being expelled from the foster care homes 1.9 Insufficient support from foster care parents
<b>Theme 2: Social support services</b>	2.1 Inadequate support from social workers 2.2 Social worker's intervention in conflict resolution
<b>Theme 3: The needs of young people exiting care and their foster parents</b>	3.1 Regular home visits by social workers 3.2 The need for life skills, career counselling, and assistance with tertiary applications 3.3 Guidance on disciplining foster care-leavers 3.4 Assistance from social workers (financial aid, social assistance, emotional support)
<b>Theme 4: Services rendered to prepare foster care-leavers for</b>	4.1 Insufficient relational transition services

<b>independent living and strengthen family relations</b>	
<b>Theme 5: Recommendations on how to maintain the relationship between the foster parent(s) and youth leaving foster care</b>	5.1 Improving communication and respect in family relationships 5.2 Frequent home visits conducted by social workers 5.3 Family meetings, life skills training, and workshops provided to foster parents and former foster care recipients 5.4 Social workers' role in timely conflict resolution to strengthen family unity 5.5 Ongoing educational and financial assistance offered to former foster care recipients

### **5.3.1. Factors contributing to relationship breakdown between foster parents and foster care leavers**

The outcomes of this research project show that there are a variety of factors contributing to relationship breakdown between the foster care-leaver and the foster parent. Some of these factors were found to be common in both foster care-leavers and foster parents. Under this theme, there are nine sub-themes that emerged from the data analysis and are presented below, supported by direct quotes.

#### **5.3.1.1 Abuse of foster care leavers by foster parents**

When explaining the reasons for the breakdown of their relationships, the care-leavers identified abuse experienced from foster parents as one of the contributing factors. The next section captures the account of participants.

One foster care-leaver described their experience in this manner:

*I was treated with such animosity by the older daughter of the foster parent. She was verbally abusive towards me and could not even hide it. There were days when I was not talking to anyone in the house and would go without food, and no one would care. I was made to walk to school on rainy days with no*

*umbrella or rain protection gear. They would not do certain things for me when I asked them, and they would say that they are saving for me for post matric. When I finally completed writing my Grade 12 exams, I asked for that money. I was told to leave the house because I am ungrateful. I came to them with no clothes or even underwear, now I am demanding money. (Foster care-leaver 6, 23 years old).*

One more foster care-leaver explained that her aunt was mean to her to an extent that she could no longer tolerate verbal abuse, and she shared as follows:

*She was mean to me, and she has been like that for as long as I can remember. We stayed with her, her daughter, and my grandmother in the house. She was abusive towards us, and we kept quiet, but as I grew up, things changed. (Foster care-leaver 1, 24 years old).*

Foster care leaver 2 echoed the same sentiments with care-leaver 1, reporting abuse by individuals within the foster household other than the foster parent, which ended up causing a relationship breakdown between the foster parent and the foster care-leaver. Foster care leaver 2 lamented in this manner:

*There is also a huge problem with my aunt in this house. She treats us so badly, and my grandmother says absolutely nothing. She reminds us constantly that this is not our home and that we must go. She is abusing us emotionally, and we have had to endure that abuse since we were children. (Foster care-leaver 2, 22 years old).*

A fellow care-leaver expressed similar concerns regarding emotional abuse in the foster home that caused conflicts in the house. Her sentiment is captured in the verbatim quote below.

*One of the issues in my case was the lack of equal treatment, the insults I had to endure. We were not allowed to go to the foster parents' bedroom, but when things disappear, it would be said that it is us. And mama would insult us. This bothered me so much as I don't like conflicts. So, I resolved to keep quiet so that my sister and I can have a home and not be moved from one home to another. (Foster care-leaver 4, 22 years old).*

The abuse of the foster care-leavers is among the causes of the relationship breakdown between foster parents and care-leavers, as shown by the results of this

research. Additionally, the findings reveal that foster care-leavers often chose to remain silent or endure the abuse inflicted by foster parents or other members of the foster family. It is reported that youth will often hide their emotions regarding the abuse and not voice out their true feelings because they feel not heard by foster parents; in any case, they fear multiple placements as this would mean they leave everything they have known, which can cause anxiety, vulnerability, and a sense of loss (Ramsay-Irving, 2015:69).

### **5.3.1.2 External influence of foster care-leavers**

During the interview, some participants ascribed the breaking of their relationship to influences from external people. One of the foster parents stated that what causes relationship breakdown is listening to outsiders. She expressed her views as follows:

*In my case, I would say, foster care-leavers are listening to outsiders more than the foster parent. These children are told bad information; they are influenced by the lies people tell them. He would even tell me I am not his parent when I reprimand him.* (Foster parent 1, 56 years old).

The other foster care-leaver reinforced the foster parent's notion by sharing the following:

*But another thing that caused a breakdown in our relationships was listening to other people. See, after I disagreed with my foster parent, I would go and tell people what had happened, and they would influence me to report my foster parent to the social workers, but that only caused further conflict.* (Foster care-leaver 4, 22 years old).

Two of the foster parents stated that outside influence, in terms of bad friendships, is also what broke their relationship with the foster care-leavers. The views of the foster parents are captured through verbatim quotes below:

*He started bringing his bad friends into my house, and they continued smoking and drinking. I then told him to leave my house.* (Foster parent 2, 62 years old).

*He befriended children who were also grant recipients, and they started poisoning him. As parents, we are not the same. Other foster parents do give their foster children all the foster care grant money after withdrawing it. I was not going to do that.* (Foster parent 4, 61 years old).

Care-leaver 3 mentioned that he was not believed, and that information from outsiders was accepted as truth over his own account. The statement below describes their narrative:

*Another major thing was that my foster parent would believe outsiders over me; when they say I stole something, he would not hear my side, but would just shout and, at one point, called the police on me. That showed me that I don't belong in his family. (Foster care-leaver 3, 23 years old).*

Building on the shared responses from both groups of this study, another foster parent openly admitted that he would consider what others were saying about his foster child. He admitted as follows:

*I don't know if she had started dating or what, because her behaviour just drastically changed. I would hear from different people that they saw her in places where she should not have been, and when I ask her, she would say she is with her friends and leave it there. (Foster parent 7, 64 years old).*

The findings reveal that outside influence is one of the contributing factors to the deterioration of the relationship between the foster care-leaver and the foster parent. The foster care-leavers and the foster parents both acknowledged that they often listened to outsiders instead of making an effort to understand one another. Ramsay-Irving (2015:70) indicates that the voice of the youth is often suppressed because the adults don't believe them when they speak. Konijn et al. (2020:494) emphasise the importance of sensitive and responsive parenting, in which the foster parent recognises and responds to the youth as an individual with unique feelings and needs, rather than relying on generalised perceptions. This approach is identified as a key mechanism for reducing the risk of placement breakdown.

### **5.3.1.3 Financial problems**

The majority of participants identified financial difficulties as a contributing factor to the deterioration of their relationship with the foster care-leavers, ultimately leading to the relationship breakdown.

Highlighting their plight with the care-leaver, one foster parent shared as follows:

*He would come to me and demand that I give him his money. He was smoking drugs, so he scared me. It got to a point where I made a protection order against him. I chased him out of the house so that he could occupy an outside room*

*and was not allowed to come inside the house ever. During pay days, he would stand by the gate for me and insult me the minute he saw me, demanding that I give him “his money”. According to him, everything I did in the house; it was his money. (Foster parent 4, 61 years old).*

Three of the foster parents reported the insufficiency of the foster child grant in meeting the financial demands of the care-leavers, and this eventually led to the breakdown of placement, as they could not fund the necessities of the foster care leaver. It seemed the young person then blamed them as they expected them to have the money since they have been receiving a foster child grant for years. They voiced their experiences as follows:

*Yes, she was receiving foster child grant, but that money is very little to raise a child, especially when the child gets into teenage or adolescence stage. I had to make sure that she eats, goes to school, and has beautiful clothes like every other child. I took all that money from my own pocket, thinking I was raising a vulnerable child, but she soon showed me that I am nothing in her life... (Getting emotional). (Foster parent 7, 64 years old).*

*I just had challenges with the finances in raising my grandchildren. The grandchild who had turned 21 years was at a college in town, and it was a challenge keeping things as they were. I saw her staying home and not going back to school; at first, she did not give any explanation but later told me that the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) did not make payment for her studies and therefore, she couldn't go back to college. And at this point, she was not receiving a foster child grant; that would have made some difference. I could not pay for residence fees and for her to eat at the same time. (Foster parent 3, 72 years old).*

*I also had a challenge with money as I could not fund her tertiary studies after the fallout with NSFAS. She had to drop out. (Foster parent 6, 70 years old).*

When asked about the causes of relationship breakdown, one care-leaver who was under the impression that her foster parents were saving money for her lamented as follows:

*It is the bad treatment the family gives to the foster child, particularly the lies about money. They would not do certain things for me when I asked them, and they would say they are saving for me for post-matric. When I finally completed writing my matric exams, I asked for that money. I was told to leave the house because I am ungrateful. I came to them with no clothes or even underwear, now I am demanding money. (Foster care-leaver 6, 23 years old).*

This was echoed by another foster care-leaver, who ended up not pursuing her tertiary studies due to a lack of financial support. This foster care-leaver lamented as follows:

*One of the things that demotivated me from pursuing my tertiary study over and above the fact that I was not accepted, is the fact that when I asked for money for taxi fare and internet services from my foster parent, she would say she does not have. It was demotivating not to have financial support. (Foster care-leaver 2, 22 years old).*

It is apparent that the foster carers also carried a financial burden while raising their foster children, and their plight was exacerbated by the cutting of the financial aid from the state. The excerpt below is taken from a statement made by the foster parent:

*The cutting of the foster child grant affected me a lot. I could not pay the policies anymore. I still had to buy him clothes, and he still had to eat, so it was very difficult; he did not understand my plight. (Foster parent 5, 37 years old).*

The social workers are mandated by legislation to review the foster care placement of the child for as long as the child is still in school or pursuing tertiary education. The mandate comes from section 176(2) of the Children's Act 38 of 2005 (Republic of South Africa, 2006:90), which reads:

“(2) A provincial head of social development may, on application by a person placed in alternative care as a child, allow that person to remain in that care until the end of the year in which that person reaches the age of 21 years if-

(a) the current alternative caregiver is willing and able to care for that person; and

(b) the continued stay in that care is necessary to enable that person to complete his or her education and training”.

However, no policy obligates foster parents to set aside funds for care-leavers, hence, the challenges stated by both the care-leaver and the foster parent above. The financial support from the state is significant in foster care families, as it alleviates poverty to a certain extent; thus, the lack of financial support has adverse consequences for foster care-leavers (Shaw et al., 2020:3). The responses of participants make it apparent that financial challenges are one of the underlying factors to relationship breakdown.

#### **5.3.1.4 Behaviour of foster care-leaver**

Several foster parents agreed that the behaviour of the foster care-leaver contributed to the relationship breakdown. The following five excerpts are the expressions of the participants:

*Their behaviour towards the one who has sacrificed so much for them hurts. I sent her to school; she socialises with boys. When you talk to her, she would give you a nasty attitude. She did not do any house chores. My wife was her helper. She was serving her. The behaviour of these children as they enter early adulthood is what causes damage to the relationship. (Foster parent 7, 64 years old).*

*He started stealing people's phones in the community and had a bad attitude at home. He did not want to do any house chores. He started roaming the streets at night, and when the gates were locked, he would jump the fence. Stealing, alcohol abuse, lying, and coming home late were also some of the great challenges that caused cracks in our relationship. (Foster parent 1, 56 years old).*

*As he grew up, it became more and more difficult to discipline him. He would talk back and not do what you tell him to do. Even house chores, he stopped doing them; he told me that he is not my slave. (Foster parent, 46 years old).*

*She was presenting with behaviours of children who are in the adolescent stage, you know that stage (giggles). But it kept getting worse; her behaviour of not sleeping at home or coming home very late became intolerable. She became worse when reprimanded because of the adolescent stage, her behaviour changed completely. (Foster parent 3, 72 years old).*

*For me, I can say these unending quarrels and the fact that now I was no longer a mother enough to my granddaughter to reprimand her. How can she start to believe that I don't love her when she is now older? This really hurt me. Her behaviour was not as I knew it. She became stubborn, and it was intolerable. (Foster parent 6, 70 years old).*

During the interview with participants, only one foster care-leaver admitted that his behaviour contributed to the relationship breakdown between his grandmother and him. He shared his opinion as follows:

*It was me. I would demand a number of things from my grandmother, and when she does not give me, I would quarrel with her. So, I started presenting a bad behaviour. (Foster care-leaver 5, 24 years old).*

The foster carers mentioned that foster care-leavers exhibited various behavioural challenges. These included coming home late, spending nights away, constant arguments, and talking back. All participants expressed a shared view that such behaviours, which they found unacceptable, often led to a breakdown in the relationship. This is consistent with the findings by Mnisi and Botha (2016:232) and Konijn et al. (2020:495), who assert that behavioural problems are among the causes that result in relationship breakdown in foster care placements.

### **5.3.1.5 Substance abuse by foster care leaver**

Substance abuse also came up as part of the causes of relationship breakdown. One foster care-leaver admitted that substance abuse had caused a strain in his relationship with the foster parent. This is evidenced by his statement below:

*As I said, it was my behaviour. I started hanging around with bad friends. During those hangouts, I started experimenting with drugs. I was in grade eleven. I would steal things and money from the house to fund my habit. My grandmother even chased me out of the house, but not to the streets. I occupied an outside room, and I was not allowed to come into the house. They would only give me food by the door. I lived like a criminal in a place I called home. (Foster care-leaver 5, 24 years old).*

Four foster carers shared detailed accounts of their experiences with foster care-leavers who were using substances, along with the resulting consequences of this behaviour. Four participants shared similar concerns as follows:

*His behaviour just spiralled after he turned 18years. I don't know if it was adulthood. He was not doing well at school. At some point, he came with alcohol and speakers to school. They drank with friends, took videos, and posted on social media. He got himself into deep trouble at school. The principal wanted to expel him, but I pleaded mercy for him. (Foster parent1, 56 years old).*

*When this boy reached 18 years of age, he started smoking cigarettes and drinking alcohol. (Foster parent 2, 62 years old).*

*It was not long before I noticed a change in his behaviour. He started coming home very high. I asked what was wrong, and he did not answer. I noticed he was smoking drugs. I was so disappointed. I later found out that the money I gave him to send his application to different universities, he bought drugs with it and therefore did not apply to any university. His use of substances caused a lot of problems for us. He could not enrol in school. I tried to send him for rehabilitation, but he would relapse and go deep into substances, so I told him that I can no longer live with him. I sent him to KZN. (Foster parent 5, 37years old).*

*This substance misuse is the behaviour that I could not tolerate. Remember, I am raising other children, so I didn't want him to be a bad influence on them. He told lies consistently, and I could not trust him. (Foster Parent 8, 46 years old).*

The results of this research project reveal that the use of substances contributed immensely to determining the fate of a foster care-leaver in the foster family. The study shows that foster parents resorted to relinquishing their responsibility towards the foster care-leaver once they started using substances. This correlates with the findings by Mnisi and Botha (2016:233), which revealed that the abuse of substances became a contributing factor to relationship breakdown in foster family relations, as the use of substances led to other unacceptable behaviour such as lying and stealing.

### **5.3.1.6 Family dynamics leading to conflicts**

Families present with different dynamics as they evolve. Some families manage to get through the process of growth together, and some are not able to do so. The evidence below suggests that some foster care families could not remain together due to the feuds in their families. One of the foster parents expressed her situation as follows:

*Unfortunately, the quarrels continued, and my granddaughter started accusing me of supporting my daughter's behaviour. Now the clash would be between my granddaughter and me. For me, I can say these unending quarrels and the fact that I was no longer a mother enough to my granddaughter to reprimand her. How can she start to believe that I don't love her when she is now older? This really hurt me. Her behaviour was not as I knew it. She became stubborn, and it was intolerable. My granddaughter still blames me for not sorting out her situation with her aunt at home. How do I choose between two people I love? (Foster parent 6, 70 years old).*

Supporting the notion that at times the relationship breakdown is not directly caused by the direct relationship of the foster carer and the care-leaver, two foster care-leavers shared their experiences as follows:

*Sometimes the cause of relationship breakdown is not directly the foster mother or father, but the family. When the foster parent does not take a stand against their own child, it makes it difficult for the care-leaver to believe the love that was previously professed. The interference of family members causes the breakdown in relationships because the foster care-leaver will always feel like the outcast, and the problem in the equation, and then choose to remove themselves. (Foster care-leaver 1, 24 years old).*

*I was treated with such animosity by the older daughter of the foster father. Mkhulu (grandfather) was hurt by all this at first. I could see how conflicted he was to a point that he started getting sick, but eventually I noticed that he was siding with his daughter and even adding to my hurt. (Foster care-leaver 6, 23 years old).*

The family is a unit, and it is evident that it cannot function in silos. The findings show that, when the family members find themselves in a position to choose one side over the other, there will not be harmony in the family relations, which eventually leads to a

separation and breakdown of relationships. It is essentially through family member interactions that family ties are preserved (Revised White Paper on Families, 2023:3)

### **5.3.1.7 Lack of discipline by foster parents to care-leavers**

The other cause of relationship breakdown that was expressed by foster carers was their inability to discipline children placed in their care, or being afraid to discipline their foster children. The following statements, quoted directly from the foster parents, serve as evidence of this.

*It became more and more difficult to discipline him. He would talk back and not do what you tell him to do. Even house chores, he stopped doing them. He told me that he is not my slave and that he was not my child. This boy told me to my face that I am not his father. It got to a point where I wanted to beat him up. That is when I saw that this has gone too far. I obviously stopped seeing him as a child because he was now behaving like a man. I lost my patience with him, and he became more distant. He would not ask me for anything. He was living his life, but we were still under the same roof. (Foster parent 2, 62 years old).*

*Now I was no longer a mother enough to my granddaughter to reprimand her. How can she start to believe that I don't love her when she is now older? This really hurt me. (Foster parent 6, 70 years old).*

*It became difficult to talk to her; no one was able to guide her because she felt like she was right all the time, and I became her enemy as I was attempting to instil discipline. (Foster parent 7, 64 years old).*

*I held back in reprimanding her, you know, children without parents. I was afraid she would... (signalling with her hand, meaning she would kill herself), but even so, she saw me as her enemy. (Foster parent 3, 72 years old).*

The foster parents believed that it was their duty to instil good morals and values in the foster care-leavers by rewarding good behaviour and giving punishment to discourage undesirable behaviour. However, the findings reveal that trust within the families was compromised, and foster parents felt a loss of authority, as they were no longer able to instil discipline in their foster children. These findings challenge the notion that a foster parent fully assumes parental responsibilities in all aspects,

including providing love, care, and discipline upon receiving a foster child (Goemans et al., 2020:235).

### **5.3.1.8 Foster care-leavers being expelled from their foster care homes**

The account from care-leavers indicates that they were expelled from foster families by their foster carers. This resulted in them being homeless and not having a relationship with their foster parents. This finding is supported by the subsequent accounts from the foster care-leavers.

*Things just happen so suddenly; I was chased out of a place I called home. I had to fend for myself, for clothes, food, and school. I thought I would leave there when I am working, or when I am ready to start my independent life. (Foster care-leaver 3, 23 years old).*

*Baba started shouting at me and telling me that I am being disrespectful. He eventually said I must leave his house because I was a woman now. So, I thought he was joking until he woke me up in the middle of the night and told me to leave his house. When I asked him where I should go, he said he did not care where I go. (Foster care-leaver 7, 25 years old).*

*I did not want to move, but it was bad. On the day I left my foster care family, they called the police for me. It was the police who packed my clothes in black plastic bags for me. To this day, I still believe those were his friends. No police official on duty can act the way they did against a child. I left, not knowing where I was going. (Foster care-leaver 6, 23 years old).*

*Our relationship got strained. My grandmother even chased me out of the house. (Foster care leaver 5, 24 years old).*

The evidence presented shows that several foster care-leavers were expelled from their foster homes, and as a result, they were left homeless. Based on the responses from participants, it is apparent that foster care-leavers still needed care from their foster care families, but the relationships were terminated when they were chased out of the places, they called home. A substantial body of research indicates that foster care-leavers are susceptible to experiencing homelessness. Researchers such as Jones (2019:262), Bond (2020:27), and Van Breda (2018:519) highlight that the lack of stable housing, limited support networks, and insufficient transitional services often

contribute to foster care-leavers facing housing insecurity or homelessness shortly after leaving care. These findings underscore the urgent need for targeted interventions and support structures to facilitate a smoother transition to independent living.

#### **5.3.1.9 Insufficient support from foster parents**

Findings from foster care-leavers indicate that they felt discriminated against when resources or provisions were allocated within the family. This perceived unequal treatment led to feelings of being unsupported by their foster care families. The lack of support is expressed in the following statements:

*In my opinion, it is the lack of support and openness, the issue of favouritism in the house, foster parents showing that they favour one child over the other. (Foster care leaver 3, 23 years old).*

*I have been noticing the gradual change, but when I was 20 years old, I finally asked my foster parent why certain things were happening the way they were happening. She got defensive and would shut off. (Foster care-leaver 2, 22 years old).*

*I was not prepared at all. I had to just find my feet with no support from my foster care family or social workers. It's like I woke up, and one day I was an adult. I thought I still had time in foster care, but it ended abruptly, just like that. And I had no place to stay, no financial support overnight. I stayed with a friend for some time, then started hustling, as I am still doing today. The foster parent did not give me support and skills to prepare me for what I would face as an adult. (Foster care-leaver 6, 23 years old),*

Based on the responses from foster care-leavers, the findings show that some of them did not feel part of the foster family. They did not receive the support they had envisaged to prepare them to transition smoothly to adulthood. It is concerning to note that, although foster parents are deemed to be an important source of support for the foster care leavers (Gilligan & Arnau-Sabatés, 2017:795), many of them enter the state of young adulthood not having social and emotional backing from their foster parents (Shaw et al., 2020:3).

### **5.3.2. Theme 2: Social support services**

The interviews with both the foster care-leavers and foster parents highlighted a significant lack of social support services. As a result, many were unaware of the services available to them. Most participants recalled only interacting with social workers once a year, typically in January, when they were called to sign documents. From these interviews, two sub-themes emerged, which are presented below.

#### **5.3.2.1 Inadequate support from social workers**

The voices of participants underscore the limited and often impersonal nature of social support services provided during the foster care period. Their accounts reveal that interactions with social workers were largely administrative, with little to no meaningful engagement or follow-up. The following direct quotes illustrate these experiences:

*I don't remember receiving support services from my social worker. The only thing I remember was going to social workers every year to sign papers for the renewal of the foster child grant. And as we were there, the social worker would say they would come home to check on us, but they never did. So, those are the only services we received from social workers. (Foster care leaver 1, 24 years old).*

*In January, to be honest, the social worker contacted her (foster care-leaver) because we needed to review the placement, as she had turned 18 years. (Foster parent 7, 64 years old).*

*I don't recall support services, and the only time our interactions were calm was when I was asked to sign documents for the release of grant money, probably because I didn't ask any questions. I even wanted to report that social worker to her seniors. She was so rude and made me feel insignificant. (Foster care-leaver 6, 23 years old)*

Participants also alluded that it was them as clients who would go to the social worker's office, and not social workers coming for home visits. The following direct quotes illustrate their perceptions:

*Not even once had I seen a social worker in my house. They always call you to their offices to come and bring certain documents, such as a foster child's school report, and to sign documents. They are inconsiderate of our plight. We spend the little money going to their offices, while they are not setting their feet in the foster family homes. (Foster parent 4, 61 years old).*

*The social worker would call me to her office to sign the documents to prevent the termination of the foster grant. When the youth reached 18 years, we were expected to submit a school report every January and to sign documents. This continued until the foster care-leaver turned 21 and the foster child grant was terminated. (Foster parent 3, 72 years old).*

*All social workers do is make you sign documents. Ohh shame, they will call you, and even so, you are the one who will go to them. I know they were supposed to support me and the foster care-leaver, but I didn't get that. (Foster parent 1, 56 years old).*

*Social workers used to call us every January to come and sign documents because if we did not go, SASSA wouldn't release the money. (Foster Parent 6, 70 years).*

*No, I did not receive any social support services from the social workers. We only went to their offices when we were called for a foster care review at court. Those were the only times we met with the social worker. (Foster parent 5, 37 years old).*

The findings reveal that participants have some awareness of the social support services they should be receiving from social service professionals; however, they are not pleased by the manner in which they received those services. It seems that the services rendered were limited to administrative tasks, with little attention given to the overall well-being of the family. There is also evidence of a lack of home visits by social workers. This correlates with research conducted regarding the work of social workers being about the routine of monitoring and administration and having no regard for the overall care of foster children and foster parents (Pryce et al., 2017:6; Mmolokoe et al., 2022: 317).

### **5.3.2.2 Social worker's intervention in conflict resolution**

In discussing their experience of social support services, many foster parents and foster care-leavers remembered instances of conflict between them that required a social worker's intervention. They also reflected on how they experienced the support provided during those times. One foster care-leaver shared the following:

*I believe social workers failed me. I would go and report to them about the challenges I was facing at home, but they would not help me. They never came to sit my foster parent and me down to understand both sides of the story. After I leave their offices, they would call him (foster parent) to make him aware that I visited their offices. Yhoo, they even ganged up on me this one time. To this day, I am still angry at that other social worker who was influencing my social worker not to hear me or act on my challenges. (Foster care-leaver 6, 23 years old).*

The account of another foster care leaver reinforces the previous statement, as he shared the following:

*I would report the challenges I was facing at home, but the social workers would simply say they would call my foster parents and apologise on my behalf. What I did not understand was what the apology was for. They would listen to my side of the story for a little bit and then tell me they have a good relationship with my foster parent, and they will talk to her, but they never did. I went to them many times, until I saw that they were tired of me, so I stopped. (Foster care-leaver 3, 23 years old).*

One foster care-leaver emphasised the importance of social workers providing support in resolving conflicts. She stated as follows:

*They need to support foster families to resolve conflicts by teaching all family members important life skills to help them coexist harmoniously. (Foster care-leaver 1, 24 years old).*

Out of sixteen participants, only three admitted to having received social support services from social workers during a period in their lives when they needed assistance with resolving a conflict between themselves and the foster care-leaver. The three foster parents described the services they received in the following ways:

*She called him to the office and interviewed him. It was the social worker who got him to admit that he was abusing drugs. (Foster parent 4, 61 years old).*

*The social worker spoke to her, and she said she would change but did not. The next thing she moved out of the house. (Foster parent 7, 64 years old).*

*They would tell me to go outside when I come to the office so that they can talk to him privately. They would then tell me he made a promise to change but has never said anything to my face about that commitment. He would lie low for a week or so and go back to his old ways. Time and again, I would come and report. I received no follow up until the next time I came to report another incident. (Foster parent 2, 62 years old).*

Findings show that there were interventions by social workers when a conflict had been reported; however, most participants expressed their dissatisfaction with the outcome of the intervention and the lack of follow-up. Konijn et al. (2020: 495) assert that interventions by social workers to equip families with competent and timely response strategies during conflict are necessary to curb placement breakdown. In this study, the relationship between the foster care-leaver and the foster parent broke down due to a lack of appropriate intervention by social service professionals.

### **5.3.3. Theme 3: The needs of the young people exiting care and their foster parent(s).**

All the participants expressed their needs, and it appears that the needs are the same. Participants expressed the need for regular home visits by the social workers, life skills, career counselling, assistance with tertiary applications, guidance on disciplining foster care-leavers, and assistance from social workers. Below is the outline of the sub-themes, supported with verbatim quotes from the participants.

#### **5.3.3.1: Regular home visits by social workers**

Both foster carers and foster care-leavers emphasised the importance of receiving regular home visits and expressing a clear need for continuous support. The statements below are direct quotes from the participants highlighting their desire for consistent home visits by social workers:

*After I reported the challenge I had with my grandson, I wish the social workers had followed up through a home visit. I wish they did random visits at home to see the child and speak to him; at least that would keep him well-behaved. (Foster parent 4, 61 years old).*

*They should be intentional about conducting home visits and talking to everyone in the house. They should not wait for matters to be reported for them to gauge if the family has a problem. Regular and random home visits are part of their role as field social workers. (Foster care-leaver 1, 24 years old).*

*Social workers must support foster parents. They need to conduct home visits so the children can see them regularly, which may help to improve the foster children's behaviour. Another thing is that we don't have the money to always go to their offices if we need their services. (Foster parent 2, 62 years old).*

*Since my placement in foster care, I don't recall social workers coming to our home to check on us. It has always been my wish to see them come to my place for a home visit. (Foster care-leaver 3, 23 years old).*

The outcome of this study shows that participants expressed a strong desire for social workers to carry out home visits as part of foster care supervision. However, this need was not fulfilled during the period when the foster care-leavers were still in care. Mmolokoe et al. (2022:317) state that social workers had infrequent contact with foster families. This aligns with one participant's account, who recalled only seeing a social worker during court proceedings.

### ***5.3.3.2: The need for life skills, career counselling, and assistance with tertiary applications***

The foster care-leavers expressed a strong need for support in developing life skills, receiving career guidance, and navigating tertiary education applications. Similarly, foster carers highlighted their wish for young people in their care to be provided with consistent support in developing life skills and pursuing tertiary education. The following verbatim quotes illustrate these accounts:

*They could have called us and the foster children to teach us how to apply for them in various tertiary institutions. In addition, teaching the foster care-leavers important life skills as they transition to young adulthood. I think that would have*

*opened his eyes (foster care-leaver) not to be involved in the misuse of drugs. Although I provide guidance at home, it is sometimes more effective when delivered by a professional. (Foster parent 5, 37 years old).*

*They (foster care-leavers) need to be empowered with information regarding bursaries. They must be asked to share their ambitions and be linked with companies or schools that offer that course or offer the skills they require before they study towards that profession. For fields such as hospitality, security, and care-leavers must be taken to institutions that offer such courses and be provided with comprehensive information to fully understand the nature and requirements of these programmes. Many of us have a desire to pursue a career in something we know absolutely nothing about. All those who want to enrol at tertiary institutions must be made aware of the bursaries available. Others are empowered with skills that can help them once they complete Grade twelve or after they turn 21 years. (Foster care-leaver 6, 23 years old).*

*As foster children, we need to be assisted or trained on how to make an application at tertiary institution. In addition, social workers must ensure that foster care leavers who meet the requirements for a tertiary institution are placed at universities or colleges. They also need to be financially assisted with money for travelling to these tertiary institutions to finalise their registrations because NSFAS always delays in the payment of allowances. (Foster care-leaver 2, 22 years old).*

*We need to be taught important life skills, especially when we are about to complete Grade twelve. You know, when you are still in school, you have teachers, but after matric, you literally have no one. You need to push yourself, and I think that's when we (foster care leavers) need support the most. (Foster care-leaver 1, 24 years old).*

*We need to be taught important life skills so that we can live independent lives after we transition from care. Skills that would help us make good choices and be able to generate our own income. (Foster care-leaver 5, 24 years old).*

*There is a need for homework and life skills centres where foster care-leavers can access the internet for research and tasks such as CV writing. These*

*centres should focus on equipping young people with essential independent living skills. For example, I am involved in gardening, and such initiatives should be supported by social workers and used as opportunities to actively engage foster care-leavers. (Foster parent 1, 56 years old).*

The findings strongly highlighted the need for life skills development, as emphasised by the participants. Foster parents expressed a desire for foster care-leavers to be equipped with essential life skills to support their transition to independent living. Similarly, care-leavers articulated the need for guidance in acquiring these skills, along with support as they move from high school to tertiary education and adulthood. Bukuluki et al. (2020:42) indicated that the support received from social support agencies through the provision of life skills, vocational training, and general support after foster care is crucial to the successful transitioning of the youth, and failure to provide these was deemed as a constraint to positive care-leaving.

### **5.3.3.3 Guidance on disciplining foster care-leavers**

Foster parents reported experiencing challenges in instilling discipline in foster care-leavers. They expressed concerns about their limited effectiveness in managing behaviour and maintaining consistent boundaries, particularly as the foster care-leavers grow older and seek greater independence. This highlights the need for additional support and training for foster parents in effective discipline strategies tailored to the demands of adolescents transitioning out of care. The following direct quotes present the views expressed by participants:

*We need to be trained on effective discipline strategies for foster children, along with the provision of structured programmes that support and guide us in child-rearing. Our foster children think that we are old-school, and it becomes difficult to teach them anything, and that is why we just become strangers to them when they are older and finding their voice. (Foster parent 6, 70 years old).*

*I wish social workers were there to talk to my grandchild when she started misbehaving. I was alone reprimanding her, and she did not heed any of my advice. (Foster parent 3, 72 years old).*

*We need support from social workers in raising and disciplining these children. It is not easy to discipline them once they reach the adolescent stage. (Foster parent 1, 56 years old).*

Findings indicate that foster parents faced challenges in instilling discipline among foster care-leavers. This challenge underscores the need for targeted support and training to equip foster parents with effective behaviour management strategies that respond to the challenges of the young people exiting care. In a study by Mmolokoe et al. (2022: 316), foster parents shared that they were not equipped to discipline their foster children and further highlighted that providing them with capacity in this area will result in improved stability in the placement.

#### **5.3.3.4 Assistance from social workers (financial aid, social assistance, emotional support)**

Another prominent theme that emerged from the participants was the need for financial assistance, social support, and attention to their emotional well-being. Foster parent 1 shared her view as follows:

*We need help with getting more sponsorship for food from different organisations. The foster child grant is insufficient to support the foster child with everything. Remember, they are children too, and their lives should be normal. They also desire the things children with surviving biological parents desire. There is a lot that we need support with, but social workers are not available. (Foster parent 1, 56 years old).*

Four participants emphasised the need for social and emotional support for foster families, and the following direct quotes illustrate their perspectives:

*We also need these workshops, intended to give a platform for the foster parents to pour out on what they feel. I believe many of them keep quiet because of the money; they wonder how they are going to survive without the money, and many others are fostering their grandchildren, and it hurts to admit the truth about their behaviour. But the workshops will give them room to offload. We need guidance and support throughout the journey of caring for a foster child, especially before they turn 18 years. (Foster parent 7, 64 years old).*

*We need support, emotionally and financially. Social workers need to organise meetings between us and foster care-leavers to be taught important life skills. (Foster parent 6, 70 years old).*

*We need assistance in raising these foster children. We need social workers who are dedicated to following up and mentoring these foster children. That will ease the load on us because it is really difficult to care for a child that has no parents. If it's your blood it's worse. It's not easy to throw them out on the streets, and therefore the challenges we face in raising them just continue. (Foster parent 4, 61 years old).*

*We also need our own support groups facilitated by social workers, because carers are confronted with many challenges with these foster children. Every orphan child presents with a variety of challenges. (Foster parent 2, 62 years old).*

The foster care-leavers also expressed a need for emotional support to help them develop a sense of belonging and strengthen their resilience.

*I think, as foster care-leavers, we needed the love we never got from our biological parents, and I am of the view that we deserve such love. Another thing, you cannot be removed from one level of poverty and be thrown into deep poverty. Social workers must pay much attention to our psychosocial well-being, and they must intensify strategies to ensure that we are looked after and that we grow in a caring and nurturing environment. (Foster care-leaver 3, 23 years old).*

*Foster care-leavers need guidance. We need to be told not to take everything to heart and focus on our future. We need to be taught to be appreciative instead of always complaining. (Foster care-leaver 4, 22 years old).*

Evidence from the results indicates that both foster carers and young people leaving care are navigating serious challenges and need more support, financially, socially, and emotionally. Foster parents highlighted the significance of receiving consistent support, including the provision of food parcels and practical guidance on how to effectively raise and care for foster children. On the other hand, foster care-leavers highlighted the critical need for social workers to prioritise their psychosocial well-

being, suggesting that more focused emotional and mental health support is essential for their successful transition to independent living. While this evidence points to the need for social, emotional and financial assistance for both foster parents and young people after leaving foster care, it is also noted that some foster care-leavers from CYCCs do receive support for tertiary studies, bursaries, money for transport, and even pocket money (Bond, 2020:30). This represents a positive practice in supporting care-leavers from residential care, and similar support measures could now be extended to those leaving foster care.

#### **5.3.4. Theme 4: Services rendered to prepare foster care-leavers for independent living and strengthen family relations**

It is often noted that many young people transition to adulthood with the backing of their parents, who provide financial assistance, educational guidance, and emotional support (Haggman-Laitila et al., 2019:634). In exploring the services received by foster care-leavers in preparation for autonomous living, foster care-leavers made it clear that social workers don't provide sufficient services to help them transition smoothly to adulthood. Within this theme, a single sub-theme emerged from the data analysis and is presented below, accompanied by direct quotations for support.

##### **5.3.4.1 Insufficient relational transition services rendered**

A recurring concern voiced by young people exiting care is the lack of social support services designed for their successful transition. Many shared that they felt unprepared to exit care, resulting in a sense of shock as they faced the sudden and challenging transition into adulthood. The following verbatim quotes illustrate their standpoints.

*I was not prepared at all for independent living. I had to just find my feet with no support from the foster family or social workers. It's like I woke up, and one day I was an adult. I thought I still had time in foster care, but it ended abruptly, just like that. And I had no place to stay, no financial support overnight. I stayed with a friend for some time, then started hustling, as I am still doing today. Being in foster care did not offer any social support or skills to prepare me for what I would face as an adult. (Foster care-leaver 6, 23 years old).*

*I felt unsupported by social workers, and they also did not offer any life skills programmes. But I don't blame them, because at school, teachers tried to make us future-ready through Life Orientation lessons. (Foster care-leaver 5, 24 years old).*

*No, I lacked support from the social work offices, even when I went there. Things just happen so suddenly; I was expelled from a place I called home. I had to fend for myself, for clothes, food, and school. I still needed the support of my foster parent to complete school. I thought I would leave there when I am working, or when I am ready to start my independent life. (Foster care-leaver 3, 23 years old).*

*Nope, I don't think the foster care system prepared me to live independently. I didn't know of the challenges I would face in my adult life. I wish someone could have prepared me properly. I wish social workers had been more intentional, as I mentioned, in teaching other children and me my age, important life skills that would have helped us as we transition into adulthood. There was no guidance as I tried to find my way at a tertiary institution. I ended up dropping out due to a lack of preparation and support. I am learning as I go. I recently turned 24 years, and still not yet established in life. I want to go back to school and complete my studies, but finances are a challenge currently, as I work at a call centre. (Foster care-leaver 1, 24 years old).*

One of the foster care-leavers mentioned that she had participated in a computer course as part of the independent living programme; however, she expressed that the certificate has not been beneficial for her, and she still expects to face major challenges ahead. The participant shared as follows:

*I don't feel I was prepared by the foster care system. I thought that after we enrolled for a computer course, we would get certificates that could help us get employment, but I have not received any. And we are not getting any updates. I have been applying to various colleges, but I haven't gotten accepted, and even if I do, I will still have challenges with paying for my school fees. In addition, I will still have to cover my day-to-day living expenses; it's tough! (Foster care-leaver 2, 22 years old).*

The findings highlight a continued gap in preparation services for young people exiting foster care. This problem has been documented in several previous studies (Goemans et al., 2020:228; Bond, 2020:26; Shaw et al., 2020:4). This will be evident as findings are discussed in the next segment, linked with the literature. Notably, according to the research results by Goemans et al. (2020:228), foster care-leavers universally confessed to needing the support services to prepare them for the challenges they are to face in the future as they venture into adulthood.

### **5.3.5. Theme 5: Recommendations on how to maintain the relationship between the foster parent(s) and youth leaving foster care**

Foster parents and foster care-leavers suggested various strategies to prevent relationship breakdowns and promote healthy, lasting family relationships. Some participants placed the responsibility of sustaining relationships on the mutual contribution by the care-leavers and foster parents, while others suggested that social workers are key in supporting and in the sustenance of these relationships. These recommendations were rooted in the expressed needs of the participants. The participants put forward the following suggestions to keep foster care relations intact.

#### ***5.3.5.1 Improving communication and respect in family relationships***

The need for better communication and respect within foster families was shared by care-leavers as a recommendation to sustain family relationships. The following verbatim quotes captured the suggestions from the foster care-leavers:

*Open communication, mutual respect, and patience should be fostered between the foster parents and foster care-leavers. Young people in care must not listen to the influence of outsiders. (Foster care-leaver 5, 24 years old).*

*Foster families should demonstrate loyalty and support for one another, and these values can be nurtured and reinforced through guidance from those working in the welfare sector. (Foster care-leaver, 22 years old).*

*I think more open communication between both the foster parent and foster care-leaver can help a lot in maintaining good family relations. Social workers can intervene when there are disputes and teach families how to handle differences and disagreements. (Foster care-leaver 2, 22 years old).*

This recommendation also reflects the concept of Ubuntu, which is grounded in the beliefs that individuals are interconnected and rely on one another for support (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2019:28). Recognising the foster care-leaver as an independent yet interdependent young adult, actively involving them in decisions related to their care, is crucial in helping to preventing placement breakdown (Konijn, et al., 2020:495). In this study's findings, respect and communication are deemed crucial to sustaining relationships. Respect is another important principle of Ubuntu, which is also a fundamental societal value that encourages treatment of members with dignity and respect, as this will encourage trust within the community (Ngubane & Makau, 2021:6).

#### **5.3.5.2 Frequent home visits conducted by social workers**

This recommendation, shared by participants, appeared to be directed to social workers. The participants unanimously presented their need for home visits as a recommendation to building healthy and stronger families. Recommendations from two of the participants are presented below:

*Social workers should take a proactive approach by conducting home visits and engaging everyone in the house. They should not wait for matters to be reported for them to gauge if the family has a problem. Regular and random home visits are part of their role. They need to support foster families to resolve conflicts by teaching all family members important life skills to help them coexist harmoniously. (Foster care-leaver 1, 24 years old).*

*I suggest that there must be random regular visits to our homes to check on foster families, and this will be helpful. The social workers should not wait to hear a bad report or wait for the foster care review time before they attend to a family. They must be involved even when all is good; in that case, cracks will be spotted earlier and dealt with earlier before they cause a family breakdown. (Foster parent 4, 61 years old).*

The participants believed regular home visits by social workers could be positively beneficial to strengthening the bond between the foster care-leaver and their foster parent. Social workers are deemed to be playing a crucial supportive role in fostering families. The research results by Pryce et al. (2017:7) demonstrate the extent to which

foster families needed social service professionals to visit their homes and that the unreliability of the social worker who was mandated to supervise them made them reluctant to seek help elsewhere. Home visits must be frequent to build consistent and reliable relationships in foster families.

### ***5.3.5.3 Family meetings, life skills training, and workshops provided to foster parents and former foster care recipients***

The young people leaving care and the foster parents recommended the provision of family conferences, life skills, and training workshops, as pertinent measures to help families thrive. Below are some of the recommendations from participants presented as direct quotes:

*The purposefulness behind each service provided is key. Family conferences and workshops are important to teach foster families how to maintain family relationships. The family conferences can be conducted as follows: firstly, the social worker can schedule a session with the foster care-leaver. Then arrange another meeting with the foster parent. Finally, they must schedule a meeting with both parties. These family conferences must take place every year before the young person exits care. The social worker should also continue visiting the family even if they are no longer receiving the foster grant. Just to check on how the young person is doing after exiting foster care. (Foster care-leaver 1, 24 years old).*

*Social workers must be practical in their interventions with the foster children. They must take them to various firms, show them how different people work, as well as in blue-collar jobs. Foster care-leavers must also be taken on a tour to visit the children who are addicted to substances, so that they can understand how they began and to see how their lives are currently. This will ensure that real-life challenges are addressed and that individuals acquire essential life skills. Foster parents and children must be called together in preparation for transition to adulthood. (Foster parent 7, 64 years old).*

*Social workers must still be available to help families even after the youth is no longer receiving the foster care grant. I believe workshops are important to bridge the gap and teach both the foster care-leaver and the foster parent*

*important life skills. Foster parents become overwhelmed by the behaviours of these children. (Foster parent 5, 37 years old).*

*Continuous life skills lessons are important, especially when the child turns into a teenager, from 15 years upwards. (Foster parent 6, 70 years old).*

The findings reveal the value of sustained, intentional, and practical assistance for both care-leavers and foster parents. Structured family engagement, life skills education, and continued involvement from social workers, even post-care, are crucial elements in promoting successful transitions to adulthood and preventing breakdowns in foster care relationships. Literature demonstrates that it is important to offer support and ongoing training to foster parents in order to equip them with relevant information and skills on how to treat foster children; this will, in turn, lower chances of relationship breakdown (Ramsay-Irving, 2015:77). Ongoing support for foster care-leavers is also important.

#### ***5.3.5.4 Social workers' role in timely conflict resolution to strengthen family unity***

It was recommended that social workers take responsibility for being readily available to resolve conflicts within families promptly, as this can help maintain family unity. One foster care-leaver suggested as follows:

*My sister, the voice of the foster children, should not be suppressed. In every foster family, there should be a mediator when there is a conflict. The foster child must be given a chance to share their side of the story and not assume that the adult is right. Families often struggle to reconcile because certain incidents lead to the child being blamed, causing lingering animosity that can last for years, an issue that could have been resolved through open dialogue facilitated by a social worker. (Foster care-leaver 3, 23 years old).*

Another foster care leaver echoed this notion and added the need for equal treatment in the foster home. The recommendation from the foster care-leaver is illustrated as follows:

*Social workers should be there to offer counselling and support to foster families. They should encourage communication between the foster carer and foster care-leaver. The care-leaver should be treated in the same way as the*

*other kids in the foster care family. The support offered to young people who exit care should not be dependent on whether they receive the foster care grant or not. Yes, that's what I think. (Foster care-leaver 8, 24 years old).*

Two foster parents also recommended as follows:

*First of all, social workers must call us together with the foster care-leavers to address our challenges. They must help us form a foster parents' forum for mutual support. So that we can also seek external assistance for the foster care-leavers. Social workers must involve foster parents in giving input regarding fostering a child and be given a chance to hear what interventions are needed. They will also learn that what we as foster parents do and say to them is not out of hate. We love them and want a bright future for them. (Foster parent 2, 62 years old).*

*Another thing, the social workers should do is to have open communication. Forming WhatsApp groups for foster parents will really help. This would mean a foster parent can access a social worker and other sources of support anytime. My problem can be brought into a larger group of foster parents, and we can help one another in finding solutions. This is what they have implemented at school, and I found it very helpful in keeping track of my grandson's schoolwork and behaviour. (Foster parent 4, 61 years old).*

The recommendations provided by the participants emphasise the critical need for timely intervention by social workers in addressing the plight faced by foster families. The responses indicate that foster families value having easy access to social workers and believe that such access can strengthen family ties and help maintain healthy relationships. Social service professionals must therefore adopt innovative approaches to ensure they remain accessible to the families they serve. The availability of social workers and their accessibility are crucial in maintaining relationships, instead of them intervening when the problem has reached a point of no return (Mnisi & Botha, 2016:238).

### **5.3.5.5 Ongoing educational and financial assistance offered to former foster care recipients**

The foster parents firmly believed that foster care-leavers must live independently after exiting foster care. They also felt that supporting foster care-leavers in achieving this independence could help reduce the likelihood of family breakdowns. They suggested that foster care-leavers should receive ongoing support in pursuing their education, along with continuous financial assistance. The foster parents' suggestions are captured in the direct quotes below:

*These children must be helped to further their studies. They must get NSFAS, because my old age grant cannot pay for everything, more especially university fees, since they are too high. (Foster parent 3, 72 years old).*

*I think if this relationship can be nurtured while the foster care-leaver is young, this impacts positively on the ties they have through adulthood. Give the foster care-leaver financial support so that they can stand on their own, and the foster parent does not feel the burden and end up letting them go because they can't sustain them financially. (Foster parent 1, 56 years old).*

*If foster families can be assisted with extra financial support to help the foster care-leaver to stand on their own. Continuous life skills lessons are important, especially when the child becomes a teen, from 15 years upwards. (Foster parent 6, 70 years old).*

These recommendations provided by the participants seem to address their needs. It is evident that unmet needs cause strain in foster family relationships, the participants are providing recommendations for sustaining families. This includes both educational support and financial assistance, as indicated in the responses above. Therefore, it is important that a provision for their smooth emancipation is made in terms of ongoing educational support and financial assistance (Keshavarzian & Bunker, 2015:30).

## **5.4. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

This segment of the report offers a discussion of the results derived from data gathered from foster parents and foster care-leavers, with findings contextualised through existing literature and relevant theoretical frameworks.

#### **5.4.1. Factors contributing to relationship breakdown between foster parents and foster care leavers**

An insight that emerged from this study was that the breakdown of foster family bonds is not an event, but it is a gradual process that is a culmination of a variety of factors. There are consistent views from the young people and the foster carers regarding the causes of relationship breakdown between them. In addition, this research study identified that emotional abuse suffered by foster care-leavers is a contributing factor to relationship breakdown. A study by Harkin and Houston (2016:102) found that emotional abuse was a predictive contributing factor to negative outcomes of young people previously in care, with affected youth exhibiting various behaviours resulting from such abuse. The majority of foster care-leavers mentioned being abused emotionally by the foster parent and/or their family members. The care-leavers indicated that they received insults from the foster parent and were treated badly by the family members, too. In line with the responses of the care-leavers, the findings by Mnisi and Botha (2016:237), as well as Dhludhlu (2024:569), reveal that foster care beneficiaries have experienced some form of abuse or maltreatment at the hands of their foster parents. This is a concern because foster care placement is deemed to be a safe space; however, reports of abuse in foster care are alarming (Ball et al., 2023:4).

In addition, outside influence seemed to have a negative contribution to the survival of the relationship between a foster parent and a foster care-leaver. It was evident that listening to outsiders created unrealistic expectations, and trust was broken. This shows the critical role played by the community in child rearing. This lines up with the ecological systems theory, which does not just focus on individuals but on their family and their surroundings, because they all play a role in family relationships (Crawford, 2020:4). Indeed, communities and family are crucial factors that are intertwined to influence the outcomes of a foster care-leaver (Bukuluki et al., 2020:41). Yet again, financial challenges were among the reasons cited by the participants as part of the causal factor for the disintegration of the relationship. It is evident that some families only care for the foster care-leavers because they receive monetary aid for them. In this study, foster parents complained of having to add from their own pockets to augment the financial deficit for the care-leaver, thus putting a strain on their already-limited financial resources. Interestingly, McDonald and Marshall (2021:19), found that

foster carers who took on the care of a foster care-leaver as a “normal parent” were able to continue funding the needs of the youth long after they left care without feeling overburdened. The youth in this research project expected the foster child grant to meet all their needs, and when this did not seem to be the case, they expressed disappointment in ways that had negative effects on the relationship. Goemans et al. (2020:229) and Shaw et al. (2020:3) reaffirm the adverse consequences suffered by young people exiting care upon the closure of the foster child grant, and many of the care-leavers end up dropping out of school, as evidenced by the responses of the participants.

Additionally, in this study, uncontrollable behaviours exhibited by foster care-leavers were reported to have a major influence on the breakdown of relationships with their foster parents. This aligns with the findings by Mnisi and Botha (2016:232), which revealed that behaviour by the adolescents, which could not be controlled by the foster parent, became a contributing factor to placement breakdown. Conversely, other literature suggests that parents were able to tolerate the difficult behaviour of the youth and asserts that the behaviour of the youth is not necessarily what leads to relationship breakdown, but rather the consequences of these difficult behaviours, such as substance misuse (Harkin & Houston, 2016:105). Linked to these observations is the fact that the use of substances compromised the relationship between foster care-leavers and the foster parent, as evidenced in this study.

In keeping with the theme of the factors contributing to relationship breakdown, it was evident from the study that families were created and were meant to exist as a unit, and not as fragmented parts of a bigger whole. Thus, the feuds that happen in the family affect the functioning of the whole family system. Therefore, following the ecological system theory, interventions should be directed at the whole family, because one system impacts on the others, and the positive emergence of the foster care-leaver to adulthood depends on the interaction of multi-systems (Gonzalez, 2015:26). Referring to foster care, Harkin and Houston (2016:109) state that building trust between family members stabilises the foster care placement, thus avoiding relationship breakdown.

The foster parents believed it was their duty to instil good morals and values in the lives of foster care-leavers by rewarding good behaviour and giving punishment to

discourage undesirable behaviour. The results show that trust was broken in foster care families, and the foster parents felt that power was taken away from them as they could no longer instil discipline in their foster children. Subsequently, some of the foster care-leavers left home or were chased away from the home by the foster parent. Literature shows that achieving autonomy and independence lies greatly in having supportive relationships; however, in foster care, it seems this role is neglected (Goemans et al., 2020:235). A significant number of foster care-leavers in this research project reported not receiving support from their foster parent. The progression of a foster care-leaver from childhood to maturity and the expectation for independence is often abrupt, without any preparation (Shaw et al., 2020:1). There are, however, positive findings by McDonald and Marshall (2021:18), where foster families were sources of ongoing support for the adult foster care-leaver; foster care-leavers were allowed to depend on the support of the foster parent for anything, as a child should; this was a key ingredient to building long-lasting relationships.

#### **5.4.2. Social support services**

Previous studies show that social support plays a crucial role in combating foster care placement breakdown (Harkin & Houston, 2016:106; Mmolokoe et al., 2022:319; Goemans et al., 2020:234). There are a variety of social services that are available to the foster families from the general community; however, a lack of knowledge hinders access to these services. The general knowledge and expectation from the participants of social support was the services from social service professionals, but social workers admitted that they were not rendering support services to care-leavers; they mentioned that they would close the file when the foster care-leaver turns 18, or extend the placement until the foster care-leaver turns 21 years if they are at school (Goemans et al., 2020:228; Mmolokoe et al., 2022: 319).

The findings from this study show a deficiency in the provision of social support services to foster care families. Sibanda and Ndamba (2023:47) argue that the status quo remains due to the shortage of social workers and their massive caseloads, as they work in crisis mode rather than in the social development approach. These results are consistent with research findings by Shaw et al. (2020:4), which confirmed the unavailability of social workers throughout the lives of the foster care-leavers, even though they yearned for their involvement and support. The foster care-leavers

believed their circumstances would have been different had they received social support from a social service professional. This study showed that social workers were mostly not available to render conflict resolution, and the frustrations of the youth spilled over to foster parents, manifesting as uncontrollable behaviour.

The Children's Act mandates that social support services be provided by social workers; however, the findings show that in practice, that is not the case. Much of the social workers' interventions were administrative. None of the participants in this study accounted to being called for other services except the signing of papers during reviews. This indicates that there was no empowerment for the foster care families. The participants in Pryce et al. (2017:6) attest to only seeing social workers when they were supposed to sign forms for the review of a foster care order or going to court. The social work services are evidently reduced to administration; the young person exiting care and their foster families are not even linked with support services within the community.

#### **5.4.3. The needs of young people exiting care and their foster parents**

The consistent voice among the foster parents and the foster care-leavers was their desire to have social workers conduct regular home visits. Evidence presented in this study shows that the need remains unfulfilled. According to the participants, the home visits would assist families with conflict management and also offer support on any issues that might be noticeable to social workers. It is the universal cry of the youth leaving foster care to receive support from social workers to handle challenges they are currently faced with, and the ones they anticipate facing in the near future (Goemans et al., 2020:228).

The youth expressed the need for career guidance and assistance with securing spaces at tertiary institutions. This was a common voice from both the foster care-leavers and foster parents. The young people presented needs that are consistent with those that were outlined in the White Paper for Social Welfare (1997:67), which emphasised the importance of supporting youth to fulfil their educational potential, and the opportunities for career guidance. This shows that the plight of the youth is still the same, and they are still in the same predicament. The outcomes of this research project also showed a great need for life skills for both the foster care-leaver and the

foster parent. The findings further demonstrated that social workers should be intentional on rendering life skills to the foster parent so they can better handle the behaviour of the foster care-leaver as they approach a new life stage. The White Paper for Social Welfare (1997:58) emphasises the life cycle approach in family interventions, stating that intervention programmes should respond to the needs of the foster families in accordance with their life stages, including the phase when foster children are transitioning into adulthood.

The researcher perceives that the relationship between a foster care-leaver and the foster parent can be very professional at times, because of the legal route taken to formalise foster care. This then makes the foster parents not feel like parents, with all parental responsibilities and rights, towards the youth. In this study, there was a greater cry from foster parents regarding needing guidance in instilling discipline to foster care-leavers in a manner that will still show love to the foster care-leaver, so that they receive discipline as they would from their biological parent. It is interesting to note that discipline is seen by foster carers as a way of treating foster care-leavers as their own, such that their inability to discipline a care-leaver disrupts their attempts to foster a sense of belonging in the care-leaver (Brown et al., 2019:225). The findings were that another need for both the foster care-leaver and foster parent was social and emotional support. Mmolokoe et al. (2022:319) emphasise the importance of emotional support from social workers in strengthening relationships. The participants also expressed a need for material assistance to augment the deficit of the foster child grant. The position of being called on as a source of financial support for adult foster care-leavers might cause a barrier to building a lasting relationship between foster parents and foster care-leavers. Foster carers in a study by McDonald and Marshall (2021:26) were happy to fulfil this role, acknowledging the interdependence of foster care-leavers. This concept of interconnectedness resonates with the theoretical framework of Ubuntu (Van Breda & Frimpong-Manso, 2020:4); this means that care-leavers need their foster parents for survival. The foster parents in this research project did not see the foster care-leavers as their responsibility, but as the responsibility of the state.

#### **5.4.4. Services rendered to prepare foster care-leavers for independent living and strengthen family relations**

The consistent voice from the youth leaving foster care is the lack of services to equip them for their next life stage. Most of them alluded to the fact that they were not prepared to transition to adulthood, and as a result, they experienced shock, as adulthood was an abrupt transition for them. Social workers made that admission that there are no mandatory services that are provided to youth after exiting care; at this point, social workers terminate all social services and close the file (Goemans et al., 2020:228). This is supported by literature that affirms that, indeed, in South Africa, there are no programmes offered to youth to support them after their transition (Shaw et al., 2019:3; Van Breda & Frimpong-Manso, 2020:3).

The Children's Act 38 of 2005 makes provision for caring for children in alternative care while they are in care, especially those in residential care. It is specific about early intervention programmes, and the subsequent rendering of independent living programmes to prepare the youth to live independently as they leave the Child and Youth Care Centre (CYCC) (Republic of South Africa, 2006:184). It is, however, not clear about the services the youth in foster care and post-care receives to get them ready to live independently. The Children's Act is silent on the services for young people exiting care. Bond (2020:1) concurs that the plight of young people exiting care is further exacerbated by the fact that no legislation or policy speaks to after-care services, and these youth are expected to fend for themselves post-care. The provision in the Act regarding a service to a foster care-leaver is the continued review of the foster child grant, provided the youth is still in school (Republic of South Africa, 2006:175); beyond that, nothing clearly articulates independent living programmes for the care-leaver.

#### **5.4.5. Recommendations on how to maintain the relationship between the foster parent(s) and youth leaving foster care**

The participants provided various recommendations to sustain relations between a foster care-leaver and the foster parent. It came out strongly from the participants that most of their recommendations are aimed at social workers. Their recommendations seem to be driven by their own needs, implying that if these needs are fulfilled, then the relationships will be maintained.

The foster care-leavers spoke of family support and communication as crucial elements to building sustainable relationships. Literature concurs that a foster care-leaver who grows up with the support of their foster parents turns out well, and this enhances stability in the family setting (Goemans et al., 2020:234; Shaw et al., 2020:3). The findings of this research project also posed a suggestion to social worker to create an open communication and even alluded to opening a WhatsApp group for foster parents, thereby creating a safe space for them that is accessible at any time. A common recommendation shared by all the study participants was that social workers should support all foster families through home visits, family conferences, support groups, and the provision of essential life skills to help maintain foster family relationships. There is constant supervision that is required from social service professionals for foster placements (Sibanda & Ndamba, 2023:49). Many foster parents suggested support groups that can be used as a source of support and coping mechanisms for the foster parent. The study by Mmolokoe et al. (2022:320) suggested the same, wherein they indicated that social workers could conduct support groups whereby foster carers gather and discuss common challenges and share solutions. This will, in turn, build a strong social support structure for the foster families and play a vital role in keeping families together.

The findings of this study showed that the responsibility of a social worker is massive in foster families. All the participants alluded to needing support services from social workers. In addition, the roles played by education and financial support in families cannot be underestimated, the study participants also alluded that offering education, both formal and informal education, and offering financial support, play a big role in helping families to thrive. This aligns with the findings by Mmolokoe et al. (2022:316), who emphasised that providing foster parents with knowledge and life skills sessions to the foster parent makes them better equipped to handle difficulties they encounter with the foster care-leaver, subsequently improving the placement stability. Alluding to family workshops, home visits, and general communication, the youth recommended that social workers should be very intentional about the services they render to foster families. This is primarily because the foster care-leaver often leaves care with no parental support, much of their support comes from social service agencies, and this is crucial for their successful emergence to adulthood (Bukuluki et al., 2019:35).

Another suggestion for helping families remain united was the provision of life skills programmes designed to expose youth to their aspirations and preferred career paths. It was also recommended that social workers remain available to foster family's post-care. It is significant that the government creates a conducive environment for foster care-leavers to transition smoothly to adulthood by offering practical life skills, training, and continued supervision after they exit care (Keshavarzian & Bunkers, 2015:29). This is a necessary support for foster care-leavers. These interventions should commence while the youth is still in care and continue as they gradually enter adulthood (Ramsay-Irving, 2015:79). Analysing the recommendations shared by all participants, it is evident that they see these as solutions to the causes of relationship breakdown; this ties up with what they have listed as their needs.

## **5.5. Conclusion**

This chapter provided a detailed account of the study's findings, structured around the main themes and subthemes identified during data analysis. The results conclusively indicated that there are a variety of causes of relationship breakdown between the foster care-leaver and the foster parent. To further understand these causes, it was important to also hear from the participants about the services they received while in care, and services that prepared them to live independently, which then could have prevented the placement breakdown. As noted by their responses, there appears to be no support services rendered to the foster family, or if there were services, they were not rendered to their satisfaction. The study also presented the needs of the care-leavers and the foster parents, which is a crucial aspect to know for one to provide suitable services to families. Lastly, the recommendations from the participants on what can be done to sustain relationships in foster families were shared by the participants. Chapter six presents the conclusions and recommendations for practice, policy makers, government, and future research endeavours.

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 6.1 Introduction

This chapter concludes and synthesises the key findings of the research project, which explored the causes of the relationship breakdown between foster parents and foster care-leavers after turning 21. The challenges faced by care-leavers and their foster parents often go unreported, as there is typically no follow-up on the circumstances of the foster care-leaver or their foster care family once care ends. Tensions in foster care family relations may already exist while the foster care-leavers are still in foster care; however, when they exit the system, no support services are provided to the foster care families. This chapter presents the research summary and conclusion that is derived from the findings of this study. Recommendations are informed by the findings of this research. As previously mentioned, the study focused on exploring the causes of the relationship breakdown between the foster parents and foster care-leavers after they turn the age of 21 years and have officially exited the care system.

### 6.2 Research summary

#### 6.2.1 Goal of the study

The goal of this study was to develop an in-depth understanding of the causes of the relationship breakdown between foster parents and foster care-leavers after turning 21. The goal of this study was achieved through the application of the qualitative research method. To accomplish the purpose of this study, the following objectives were pursued.

#### 6.2.2 Summary based on the objectives of the study

A qualitative research methodology was adopted to investigate the underlying causes of relationship breakdown between foster parents and foster care-leavers after turning 21. Guided by a constructivist worldview, the study employed semi-structured interviews to address the primary research question: **What are the causes of the relationship breakdown between foster parents and foster care-leavers after turning 21?** An interview schedule was designed to facilitate comprehensive data collection in alignment with the study's objectives, which were further broken down into sub-questions. The method aimed to elicit in-depth, participant-driven discussions concerning the aspects below:

- To explore the causes of the relationship breakdown between foster parent(s) and youth(s) leaving foster care.
- To investigate social support services available for foster parent(s) and youth(s) leaving foster care.
- To examine the needs of the youth(s) leaving foster care and their foster parent(s).
- To explore services received by foster parents and foster care-leavers from social workers to strengthen family relationships.
- To provide recommendations on how to sustain the relationship between the foster parent(s) and youth(s) leaving foster care.

### **6.3 Summary of findings, conclusions, and research objectives achievement**

#### ***6.3.1 Objective 1: To explore the causes of the relationship breakdown between foster parent(s) and youth(s) leaving foster care***

The foster care system was established to nurture relationships, ensuring the realisation of the rights of children and youth, as alluded to in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Republic of South Africa, 1996:11). The Children's Act 38 of 2005, outlines the aim of foster care; and it is to create stable and nurturing family relationships that stand the test of time (Republic of South Africa, 2006:178). This study showed that many relationships within foster families do not endure over the long term, often resulting to the isolation of the foster care-leaver who is left without a reliable source of support once these relationships are terminated. In addition, the findings in this study revealed that there are different causes of relationship breakdown, namely: abuse of foster care-leavers by foster parents, external influence on foster care-leavers, financial problems, behaviour of the foster care-leaver, substance abuse by the foster care-leaver, family dynamics leading to conflicts, lack of discipline by foster parents to foster care-leavers, foster care-leavers being expelled from the foster homes, and insufficient support from foster parents. Some causes of the relationship breakdown were reported by the foster care-leaver and the foster parent, while others stemmed solely from either the foster parent or the foster care-leaver. Foster care-leavers described their experiences of treatment by foster parents as abusive and highlighted a lack of adequate support from them. The abuse escalated into intolerable levels, ultimately leading to the breakdown of the

relationship. It is well documented that abuse within foster care placements contributes to placement instability and eventual breakdown, as it leads to a loss of trust in the very adults who were meant to provide care and support (Ball et al., 2023:4). Foster parents attributed the breakdown in their relationships with foster care-leavers to several factors, including external influences, financial difficulties, behavioural issues, substance abuse, complex family dynamics, and a lack of discipline. It appears that the foster parent lacked the authority to discipline the foster care-leavers because they are not their biological children. There were no facilitated conversations about future roles, financial responsibilities, boundaries, and continued contact; thus, foster parents and the foster care leaver entered the post-care phase with mismatched expectations. Such ambiguity eventually caused a relational breakdown.

A study by MacDonald and Marshall (2021:14) found that when the foster care-leaver is fully integrated in the family, the foster parent freely disciplines them, and the discipline is well-received by the foster care-leaver. Similarly, a study by Brown et al. (2019:226) found that the behaviour of the youth was tolerated by foster parents who adopted the “no matter what” attitude towards the care of the youth, showing that they fully accept them as their own. Thus, discipline can be instilled as a form of care amidst challenging behaviour.

Family plays a vital role in supporting foster care-leavers with their transition to adulthood. The secure foundation offered by the foster family provides youth leaving care with a stable support system, promoting a smoother and more positive transition into young adulthood (Harkin & Houston, 2016:109). It is interesting to note that when the foster care-leaver has not positively adjusted in the family, eventually the relationships break down. In this study, foster care-leavers expressed feeling discriminated against, they perceived unequal treatment compared to others, and a lack of a sense of belonging within their foster families. This aligns with concerns raised by adolescents in a study by Mnisi and Botha (2016:240), who highlighted that they did not feel fully integrated into the foster family by receiving equal treatment to that of other children in the household. The underlying causes for the disintegration of these foster care relations require urgent attention from service providers. Family preservation is part of the primary mandates of the Department of Social Development as well as child protection organisations; thus, the achievement of the aim of foster care requires intentionality from all service providers.

### **6.3.2 Objective 2: To investigate social support services available for foster parent(s) and youth(s) leaving foster care**

None of the participants in this study reported receiving social support services. The only support service they could recall was being called to the social worker's offices in January of each year to sign paperwork and to submit the school report. Social workers seldom have time to do a thorough assessment of the foster care environment. This coincides with findings of Mmolokoe et al. (2022: 317), who reported that social workers were only visible during review meetings or court appearances. This reduces the work of a social worker to that of an administrator, and that is an ineffective use of child protection social workers (Sibanda & Ndamba, 2023:46).

It can therefore be concluded that there still exists a huge gap in service delivery by social service professionals in the lives of foster care families, particularly those looking after the foster care-leavers. Many participants demonstrated an awareness of social support services they were entitled to but ultimately did not receive. The findings reveal that the involvement of social workers is limited to review periods or extension of the foster care order. Though social workers are available during times of conflict, the support they provide is often inadequate, allowing tensions to escalate to a point where effective intervention is no longer possible. The participants believed that family mediation services during and after the transition phase could have provided a platform for addressing misunderstandings before they escalated. Ultimately, where professional mediation is absent, the result is the relationship breakdown as noted by Mnisi and Botha (2016:239), where the foster parents acknowledged that timely intervention by social workers could have led to more positive placement outcomes.

### **6.3.3 Objective 3: To examine the needs of the youth(s) leaving foster care and their foster parent(s)**

The study clearly highlights the support requirements of both young people leaving care and their foster parents. The research emphasises that all foster families have several key needs. These include regular home visits by social workers, access to life skills training, career counselling, and support with tertiary education applications, guidance on appropriate disciplinary approaches for foster care-leaver, and various forms of assistance from social workers, including financial aid, social support, and

emotional guidance. Even though the participants were able to clearly articulate their needs, the study demonstrated that these needs remained unmet, and this posed a risk to the stability of a relationship between a foster care-leaver and his/her foster parent. Thus, equipping foster care-leavers with life skills and ensuring positive, supportive family environments contribute significantly to a successful transition and the achievement of self-sufficiency (Bukuluki et al., 2020:42). In a study by Frimpong-Manso (2020:20), the participants attributed their successful transition to adulthood to the educational and financial support they received from the care village, since many of them emerge to adulthood with no financial support from their families. Bond (2020:30) also reported the positive outcomes of the youth who were provided with material assistance, money for transport, and bursaries post-care. However, this assistance was available to care-leavers from residential care settings, but not those in related or unrelated foster care placements. This study shows that foster parents experience financial vulnerabilities, too. It was clear that termination of the foster child grant threatened household functioning, especially in socio-economically disadvantaged families, and eventually broke family bonds, as alluded to by Shaw et al. (2019:3). Where foster parents continue to provide accommodation or financial assistance without state support, they experienced stress and fatigue.

***6.3.4 Objective 4: To explore services received by foster parents and foster care-leavers from social workers to strengthen family relationships.***

This study showed that there were no services that were rendered by social workers to equip the youth to live independently. The only support foster care-leavers received from social workers was administrative in nature, with little or no focus on addressing the core challenges experienced by foster care-leavers in preparing them for future difficulties. Social workers failed to facilitate structured, intentional discussions about relational adjustment and continuity beyond the statutory care period. Many of the foster care-leavers experienced shock as they transitioned to young adulthood, with the abrupt termination of family support and care. The findings of this study align with a study by Keshavarzian and Bunker (2015:30), which found that foster care-leavers expressed shock as they became emancipated with no high school education or a place to stay. They voiced a challenge of receiving no assistance from the family as well as receiving no support services from care agencies or social workers (Keshavarzian & Bunker, 2015:30).

Both the foster care-leaver and foster parent reported that they would inform social workers when they faced relationship challenges; however, there were no services provided by social workers to help strengthen these relationships as part of the preparation for independent living, so that their transition can be similar to that of their peers in parental care. This study shows that services prioritised risk management and administrative compliance rather than relational strengthening. This reflects a consistent pattern among social workers of not providing services aimed at strengthening family relations post-care or addressing their challenges. Mmolokoe et al. (2022:319) concur that social workers will not make follow-ups to foster care families; even when the families have reported an incident, they would make a promise but will not honour that promise. Shaw et al. (2020:4) emphasised the duty of social service professionals to render constant home visits to foster care families as a way of strengthening family ties. The findings of this study highlight significant gaps in social workers' interventions within foster families. The unavailability of structured relational mediation and post-care follow-up services highlights a significant breach in practice. The lack of services aimed at strengthening family relationships often leads to broken bonds, leaving foster parents and care-leavers to navigate complex emotional transitions independently.

### ***6.3.5 Objective 5: To provide recommendations on how to sustain the relationship between the foster parent(s) and youth(s) leaving foster care***

Drawing from the findings of this study on the causes of the relationship breakdown in foster families, several important recommendations for social work practice have emerged. Foster families have no formalised relational aftercare structures or policies that ensure continuity of support beyond statutory care. It was important to receive recommendations directly from the participants, as the study focused on their lived experiences and perspectives on sustaining relationships. The participants suggested several key recommendations: enhancing communication and mutual respect within family relationships; increasing the frequency of home visits by social workers; organising family meetings, offering life skills training, and workshops for both foster parents and former foster care recipients; ensuring social workers play a proactive role in timely conflict resolution to promote family unity; and providing ongoing educational and financial support to former foster care recipients. The concept of relational permanency emphasises lasting emotional connections rather than solely legal

permanence. However, this study confirms that state parenting often operates from a premise of risk management and administrative accountability over relational sustainability (Collins, 2018:8).

The empirical evidence showed that social workers' interventions to ensure that support on all levels is achieved is of paramount importance, with the ultimate aim of promoting stable family relationships (Harkin & Houston, 2016:109; Frimpong-Manso, 2020:20; Bukuluki et al., 2020:35). The literature highlights the crucial role relationships play in facilitating a smooth transition for foster care-leavers as many foster families serve as sources of support to the youth emerging into adulthood (MacDonald & Marshall, 2021:18). The availability of parental care and support is lifelong for youths raised by their biological parents. However, foster care-leavers often lack this crucial support as they transition into adulthood (Bukuluki et al., 2020:35). Therefore, the ongoing support from social services professionals is considered crucial for all foster families to maintain their relationships and stability. In the next section, recommendations that emanated from the study's findings will be given.

#### **6.4 Recommendations**

The findings of this study demonstrate that long-lasting and healthy relationships depend on the interconnectedness of families as a system, and the involvement of social service professionals in offering the much-needed after-care services and support. In light of these research findings, the following recommendations are presented for social service practitioners, policymakers, government, and future research initiatives.

- ***Recommendations for social work practice***

Family preservation interventions should adopt a multi-level systemic approach, recognising that the family functions as part of a broader system and does not exist in isolation. Relationship breakdowns often result from the interplay of multiple factors across these systems. Additionally, a community-based mentoring and coaching programme should be established to support foster care-leavers as they transition to independent living. Independent living programmes offered to young people exiting foster care must be clearly outlined in a Section 175 report by a social worker, and the discharge order must only be issued when these conditions are met. Social workers must be provided with the training needed to implement these programmes. Social

workers should go beyond administrative tasks and prioritise therapeutic interventions to support the core goal of foster care, which is fostering long-lasting, meaningful relationships.

Social service professionals should implement mandatory support groups for foster carers and foster care-leavers, beginning prior to the youth leaving foster care. Additionally, parenting skills training should be provided in collaboration with other child protection organisations to equip foster parents with effective discipline strategies and approaches to managing challenging behaviour. From the age of fifteen, all foster care beneficiaries should be given access to practical life skills training, while vocational training should be offered to all foster care-leavers to ignite their interest and prepare them for the realities of the workforce.

- ***Recommendation for policy development***

A policy that responds to the needs of foster care-leavers after exiting foster care, and the needs of their foster parents must be established. It must outline mandatory services that social service professionals should render to foster families, particularly those with youth leaving care. This statement addresses the policy gap in the Children's Act 38 of 2005, which currently discontinues foster care services for foster care-leavers after the age of 21, without providing any guidance or provisions for their support beyond that age. The developed policy should require the allocation of additional funds for foster care beneficiaries, with the funds held in trust and made accessible to the youth upon exiting the care system.

- ***Recommendation to the government***

The South African government can enact legislation to prioritise social grant beneficiaries for financial aid at institutions of higher learning, in order to reduce their vulnerabilities. This would help create a more equitable system that supports the educational advancement and long-term stability of disadvantaged youth.

- ***Recommendation for further research***

The focus of this research project was specifically on foster care-leavers and foster parents, excluding social workers who provide essential supporting services to foster families. Thus, further research is needed on the role of social workers in strengthening relationships within foster families. Furthermore, research focusing on the ability of

child protection social workers rendering foster care services to render independent living programmes is necessary.

## **6.5 Chapter conclusion**

This study presented various elements that contributed to the disruption of the relationship between a foster care-leaver and the foster parent. It is clear that not a single factor is the cause, but multiple factors are at play. The study brought an important understanding that relationship breakdown is not an event but rather a process that plays out over time. There is an apparent need for continued social, emotional, and financial assistance for both foster parents and young people exiting foster care. While it is important to note the factors stated by participants as causes of relationship breakdown, the significant contribution by social workers in helping to sustain the relationships in foster families cannot be ignored. Evidently, the limited social support services by social workers contribute immensely to the placement breakdown. There is a clear need for continuous support for the foster families even after the youth has left care. The unmet needs of foster families result in relationship breakdown. While the youth is in care, their needs are met by the foster parent in collaboration with the state, thus the load is bearable for the foster parents. However, when the support of the state is terminated, the foster families are left with no support or guidance.

Given the causes of relational instability identified above, it is deemed necessary for all service providers to explore interventions and policy approaches that may promote relational continuity. Social services professionals must therefore embrace their important role in keeping families together and be intentional in responding to the needs of foster families. They must ascertain that the youth is securely integrated within the foster family, because a sense of belonging can be a protective factor against relationship breakdown. The ecological systems theory asserts that an intervention in one system impacts the other; thus, in foster care, it is important to build strong, long-lasting relationships between foster parents and foster care-leavers, as this impacts how the foster care-leaver fares and transitions to adulthood and subsequently obtains independence. Consistent with the ecological systems theory in building supportive relationships, it is also vital to provide life skills to the families and opportunities for further learning for foster care-leavers. Financial assistance, educational provisions, and community networks contribute positively to youth

outcomes; therefore, structured relational aftercare services are essential for foster families. Ultimately, the building and strengthening of family ties does not depend on social workers, foster parents, and caregivers alone. There must also be interventions by the Department in policy change or development. Post care support services to foster parents and foster care leavers are successful when supported by robust policy and statutory guidance (Feather et al., 2024:1589).

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## Appendix 1: Curriculum Vitae of the Researcher

### CURRICULUM VITAE

Andiswa Khanyiswa Noluvo Gova

#### CONTACT DETAILS

**Title:** Mrs.  
**First Names:** Andiswa Khanyiswa Noluvo  
**Surname:** Gova  
**Maiden Surname:** Mtlomelo  
**Residential Address:** 60 Holzgen Street  
Brackenhurst  
Alberton  
1448  
**Postal Address:** 60 Holzgen Street  
Brackenhurst  
Alberton  
1448  
**Contact Number:** 081 442 4905  
**Email:** andiswa.mtlomelo@gmail.com

#### PERSONAL INFORMATION

**Gender:** Female  
**ID No:** 860706 0823 089  
**Nationality:** South African  
**Marital Status:** Married  
**Health:** Good  
**Criminal Offence:** None

#### CAREER OBJECTIVE

A passionate and result driven professional with 17 years of experience in Statutory services. Extensive experience on the development and implementation of programmes for vulnerable children and their families. Seeking to advance integrated social development in all spheres of government.

#### EDUCATIONAL QUALIFICATION

##### Matric (Grade 12)

**Year:** 2003  
**Name of School:** Fumana Comprehensive School

##### Bachelor of Social Work (BSW)

**Year:** 2008  
**Name of Institution:** University of Pretoria

##### Certificate: Employee Wellness

**Year:** 2016  
**Name of Institution:** UNISA

##### BA Honors in Psychology

**Year:** 2021  
**Name of Institution:** UNISA

#### CURRENT STUDIES

**Course:** Master of Social Work

**Name of Institution:** UNISA  
**Year:** 3<sup>rd</sup> year

### WORKING EXPERIENCE

**Employer:** Department of Social Development  
**Position:** **Social work Supervisor**  
**Duration:** **2022-To date**

#### **Key Roles and Competencies**

- To supervise, coordinate and implement intake and field social work services in line with performance management, departmental internal and external development initiatives, and information management to ensure the delivery of quality and timeous services to individuals, families, groups, and communities.
- Supervise adoption services in the region
- Manage the satellite office and supervise a team of eight social service professionals
- Quality assure services and deal with client's complaints
- Facilitate workshops and in-service training sessions
- Collaborate with different stakeholders involved in child protection
- Ensure service delivery in line with relevant legislation, policies, and standards
- Monitor implementation and evaluate programme outcomes
- Conduct performance appraisal and implement individual development plans
- Monitor adherence to departmental norms and standards, ethical and professional conduct
- Compile reports on statistics, audits, and services delivery
- Assisting in budgeting process for social work programmes
- Ensure cost-effective use of departmental resources.

**Employer:** **Department of Social Development**  
**Previous Position:** **Social Worker**  
**Duration:** **2008 to 2022**

#### **Key Roles and Competencies**

- Investigate and manage cases of child abuse, neglect, and exploitation in accordance with the relevant legislation.
- Render trauma debriefing services
- Conduct risk assessments and safety planning for vulnerable children.
- Provide psychosocial support for Unaccompanied and Separated Migrant Children (USMC)
- Conduct mediation in contact and care cases.
- Conduct educational, therapeutic and support groups on ongoing basis.
- Facilitate statutory interventions, including court applications for foster care, temporary safe care, adoptions and protection orders.
- Provide comprehensive assessments report and appear as expert witness in children's court matters.
- Monitor child development and progress through home visits.
- Assist in family re-unification locally and across boarder where appropriate.
- Deliver prevention and early intervention programmes in schools and in communities.
- Advocate for the rights and best interests of children in all interventions.
- Acting as a social work Supervisor

### SKILLS AND COMPETENCIES

- Computer literacy: Word, Excel and PowerPoint
- Strategic and operational planning
- Counselling
- Report Writing
- Mediation
- Project management
- Knowledge of SAP CRM-7

- Conflict resolution skills
- Research skills and assertiveness
- Ability to work independently and as part of a team
- Analytical presentation and strategic thinking
- Sound communication and interpersonal skills
- Time management and organizational skills
- Driving skills with a Code 10 (C1) driver's license

## REFERENCES

- **Ms. Joyce Mathipa** 079 6919 251/(011) 820 0300  
Social Work Manager: Intake and Field @ Department of Social Development
- **Ms. Linda Tshamase:** 082 576 9597  
Social Work Manager: Intake and Field @ Department of Social Development
- **Mrs. Nelly Jele** 011 617 6541/ 083 626 0926  
Former Supervisor: Statutory Unit @ Department of Social Development

**Appendix 2: Researcher acknowledgement**

**Research title:** Exploring the causes of the relationship breakdown between the foster parent(s) and care-leaver(s) after turning 21

**Researcher: Andiswa Khanyiswa Noluvo Gova**

I, Andiswa Khanyiswa Noluvo Gova, ID number 8607060823089, in my personal capacity as a researcher, acknowledge that I am aware of and familiar with the stipulations and contents of the following:

- Unisa Research Policy
- Unisa Ethics Policy
- Unisa IP Policy

and that I shall conform to and abide by these policy requirements



2025.06.16

.....

.....

**Signature**

**Date**

### **Appendix 3: Letter requesting permission to conduct research**

**Research title:** Exploring the causes of the relationship breakdown between foster parent(s) and care-leaver(s) after turning 21

**Researcher:** Ms. Andiswa Khanyiswa Noluvo Gova

Gauteng Department of Social Development

11<sup>th</sup> Floor, 69 Commissioner Street Johannesburg, Thusanong Building

011 355 7855

#### **Request for permission to conduct research at the Department of Social Development**

**Dear Regional Director**

I, Andiswa Khanyiswa Noluvo Gova, a Masters student at the University of South Africa under the supervision of Dr. Sandile Dhludhlu a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Social Work at the University of South Africa, request permission to conduct research at the Department of Social Development with foster parents and foster care leavers beyond the age of 21years.

The aim of the study is to develop an in-depth understanding of the causes of relationship breakdown between the foster parent(s) and youth(s) leaving care who have reached the age of 21 in Ekurhuleni Region, Gauteng Province.

The study will be undertaken through a qualitative research method where the participants will be interviewed in order to gather information and it will be voluntary. Before the commencement of the interview, participants will sign a consent form, and this will explain the rules and regulations of the study in detail as well as their rights. The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed to form data and will be kept confidential.

The benefit of the study is that the participants will be given an opportunity to state their experiences of causes of relationship breakdown between foster parents and foster care leavers who have been in foster care most of their lives, who suddenly face a challenge of no support structure once they reach the age of 21years. Understanding the causes of relationship breakdown between the foster parent(s) and foster care

leaver(s) will help child protection organisations, social workers, and any other important role players to provide the needed support services to foster parent(s) and foster care leaver(s), and lessen any negative outcomes, which might be experienced. Furthermore, to establish guidelines for social workers providing foster care services to foster care leavers. Lastly, to contribute to policy development and recommendations for social work practice.

Potential risks are that the participants will be from the same environment or area who might know one another; this may lead to unintentional disclosure of private information of another participant who chose to be anonymous; however ethical considerations will always be adhered to by the researcher. Also, while sharing their experiences the participants may be triggered emotionally; when that happens, they will be referred for counselling for further assistance. The study has minimal risks because it will not be conducted in an unsafe environment.

Feedback will entail a complete document of the research and will be available when requested for further use.

Yours sincerely

**Ms. Andiswa Khanyiswa Noluvo Gova**

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'SK', enclosed within a light gray rectangular border.

**Signature of researcher**

Dear Andiswa Khanyiswa Noluvo Gova

**RE: APPLICATION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH IN THE GAUTENG  
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT**

Thank you for your application to conduct research within the Gauteng Department of Social Development.

Your application for the research titled *"Exploring the causes of the relationship breakdown between foster parent(s) and care-leaver(s) after turning 21"* approved by the University of South Africa has been considered and approved for support by the Department as it was found to be beneficial to the Department's vision and mission. The approval is subject to the Department's terms and conditions as endorsed on the 13<sup>th</sup> of November 2019. This approval letter is valid from the date of approval until June 23, 2025.

You have permission to interview departmental officials and beneficiaries, conduct observations and access relevant documents where necessary.

May I take this opportunity to wish you well on the journey you are about to embark on. We look forward to a value adding research and a fruitful co-operation.

With thanks

  
Mr Sinyo Makunyane  
Director: Monitoring & Evaluation  
Date: 14/05/2024

## **Appendix 4 (a): Participant information sheet (Care-leaver)**

**Research title:** Exploring the causes of the relationship breakdown between foster parent(s) and care-leaver(s) after turning 21

**Researcher:** Andiswa Khanyiswa Noluvo Gova

**Ethics clearance reference number:** 3825

**Research permission reference number (if applicable):**13/08/2024

Title: Exploring the causes of the relationship breakdown between foster parent(s) and care-leaver(s) after turning 21

### **Dear Prospective Participant**

My name is Andiswa Khanyiswa Noluvo Gova, and I am doing research with Dr. Sandile Dhludhlu, a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Social Work towards my master's degree in social work at the University of South Africa. We are inviting you to participate in a study entitled 'Exploring the causes of the relationship breakdown between foster parent(s) and care-leaver(s) after turning 21.'

### **WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?**

I am conducting this study to develop an in-depth understanding of the causes of the relationship breakdown in foster care homes as the youth leave care, and understanding the needs of these beneficiaries so that appropriate planning that caters to their specific needs can be developed to foster long-lasting family bonds and produce responsible adults who were in the foster care system. The findings will help child protection organisations, social workers, and any other important role players to provide the support services needed by foster parent(s) and care-leaver(s), and lessen any negative outcomes which might be experienced.

### **WHY AM I BEING INVITED TO PARTICIPATE?**

You have been chosen to participate in the study because you are a youth that was previously in foster care, you have left the foster care system, and you are between the ages of 21 years and 26 years. There is an estimated number of sixteen participants in this study. A list of care-leavers was sought from the Department of Social Development; therefore, your information was obtained from the Department of

Social Development in the Eastern corridor/ Ekurhuleni region with permission from the provincial head.

### **WHAT IS THE NATURE OF MY PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY?**

You will be asked a variety of open-ended question that will help the researcher to understand your lived experiences of the causes of the relationship breakdown between foster parents and care-leavers. The study involves semi-structured interviews that will be audio-recorded, and are estimated to take approximately 45 to 60 minutes. The following questions will be asked:

- What was your overall experience like in foster care?
- At what age did you start feeling a change in your relationship with your foster parent(s)?
- How would you describe the relationship with your foster parents before you turned 21?
- Please share with me the causes of relationship breakdown between foster parent(s) and youth(s) leaving care.
- What are the social support services available for youth(s) leaving care?
- Do you feel that the foster care system prepared you for independent living? If not, what was lacking?
- What is the role of social workers in strengthening family relationships?
- What are the needs of the youth(s) leaving care before they leave the foster care system?
- Please recommend strategies that will promote family ties between care-leaver(s) and foster parent(s).
- Do you think the foster care system should provide continued support for care-leavers after they turn 21? Why or why not?

### **CAN I WITHDRAW FROM THIS STUDY EVEN AFTER HAVING AGREED TO PARTICIPATE?**

Participating in this study is voluntary and you are under no obligation to consent to participate. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep, and be asked to sign a written consent form. You are free to withdraw at any

time and without giving a reason, and if you feel any discomfort while sharing your experiences, the researcher is obliged to refer you for counselling for debriefing.

### **WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?**

The benefit of the study is that the participants will be able to share their experiences of the causes of relationship breakdown between foster parents and care-leavers so that appropriate planning that caters to their specific needs can be developed to foster long-lasting family bonds and produce responsible adults who were in the foster care system. The research will provide a clear and deeper understanding of their everyday challenges which will ensure that support is provided to them as needed.

### **ARE THERE ANY NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES FOR ME IF I PARTICIPATE IN THE RESEARCH PROJECT?**

There are no risks associated with participating in this study. However, sharing your lived experiences may evoke some emotions. You will retain the right to withdraw at any stage of the research process without any consequence, and if you feel any discomfort while sharing your experiences, the researcher is obliged to refer you for counselling for debriefing.

### **WILL THE INFORMATION THAT I CONVEY TO THE RESEARCHER AND MY IDENTITY BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?**

You have the right to insist that your name is not recorded anywhere and that no one, apart from the researcher and identified members of the research team, know about your involvement in this research. Confidentiality will only be breached if it is in your best interest, such as debriefing with the identified counsellor if you become emotional while sharing your experiences or answering personal questions. Your answers will be given a pseudonym and you will be referred to in this way in the data, any publications, or other research reporting methods such as conference proceedings.

Your answers may be reviewed by people responsible for ensuring that research is done properly, including the supervisor, transcriber, external coder, and members of the research ethics review committee. The data obtained from this research study may be used for other purposes, such as a research report, journal articles and/or conference proceedings, but individual participants will not be identifiable, thus maintaining your privacy.

## **HOW WILL THE RESEARCHER(S) PROTECT THE SECURITY OF DATA?**

Hard copies of your answers will be stored in a locked cupboard at the researcher's private residence for a period of five years and will also be stored on a computer encrypted with a password for future research or academic purposes. If the data needs to be used again it will be subjected to further research ethics review and approval if applicable. If the time to destroy the information provided by the participants has come, hard copies will be shredded, and electronic copies will be permanently deleted from the computer's hard drive.

## **WILL I RECEIVE PAYMENT OR ANY INCENTIVES FOR PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY?**

You will not receive any payment or any other incentive for your participation in the study. Your participation remains voluntary.

## **HAS THE STUDY RECEIVED ETHICS APPROVAL?**

This study has received written approval from the Research Ethics Review Committee of the College of Human Sciences, Unisa. A copy of the approval letter can be obtained from the researcher if you so wish.

## **HOW WILL I BE INFORMED OF THE FINDINGS/RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH?**

If you wish to be informed of the final research findings, please contact **Andiswa Gova** on **081 4424 905** or email her at **67061001@mylife.unisa.ac.za**.

Should you have concerns about how the research has been conducted you may contact the student's supervisor **Dr. Sandile Dhludhlu** on **012 429 4285** or email him at [dhludsl@unisa.ac.za](mailto:dhludsl@unisa.ac.za). You can also contact the research ethics chairperson **Prof KJ Malesa** on **012 429 6054** or email her at [maleskj@unisa.ac.za](mailto:maleskj@unisa.ac.za).

Thank you for taking time to read this information sheet and for participating in this study.

Thank you.

**Andiswa Gova**



## **Appendix 4 (b): Participant information sheet (Foster parent)**

**Research title:** Exploring the causes of the relationship breakdown between foster parent(s) and care-leaver(s) after turning 21

**Researcher:** Andiswa Khanyiswa Noluvo Gova

**Ethics clearance reference number:** 3825

**Research permission reference number (if applicable):**13/08/2024

Title: Exploring the causes of the relationship breakdown between foster parent(s) and care-leaver(s) after turning 21

### **Dear Prospective Participant**

My name is Andiswa Khanyiswa Noluvo Gova, and I am doing research with Dr. Sandile Dhludhlu, a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Social Work, towards a master's degree in social work at the University of South Africa. We are inviting you to participate in a study entitled 'Exploring the causes of the relationship breakdown between foster parent(s) and care-leaver(s) after turning 21.'

### **WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?**

I am conducting this study to develop an in-depth understanding of the causes of relationship breakdown in foster care homes as the youth leave care, and understanding the needs of these beneficiaries so that appropriate planning that caters to their specific needs can be developed to foster long-lasting family bonds and produce responsible adults who were in the foster care system. The findings will help child protection organisations, social workers, and any other important role players to provide the needed support services to foster parent(s) and care-leaver(s), and lessen any negative outcomes, which might be experienced.

### **WHY AM I BEING INVITED TO PARTICIPATE?**

You have been chosen to participate in the study because you have fostered a youth who has left foster care and who has reached the age of 21 years. There is an estimated number of sixteen participants in this study. A list of care-leavers was sought from the Department of Social Development; therefore, your information was obtained from the Department of Social Development in the Eastern corridor/ Ekurhuleni region with permission from the provincial head.

## **WHAT IS THE NATURE OF MY PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY?**

You will be asked a variety of open-ended questions that will help the researcher to understand your lived experiences of the causes of the relationship breakdown between foster parents and care-leavers. The study involves semi-structured interviews that will be audio-recorded and are estimated to take approximately 45 to 60 minutes. The following questions will be asked:

- How would you describe your overall experience as a foster parent?
- How did your relationship with the care-leaver evolve over the years?
- At what point did you notice a shift in your relationship with the care-leaver?
- Can you identify specific events or circumstances that contributed to the change?
- What challenges, if any, did you face while fostering the child as they approached adulthood?
- How did those challenges impact your relationship with the care-leaver?
- Please share with me the causes of relationship breakdown between foster parent(s) and youth(s) leaving care.
- What are the social support services available for foster parents caring for youth(s) leaving care?
- What is the role of social workers in strengthening family relationships?
- How would you describe your relationship with the care-leaver after they turned 21?
- Do you remain in contact with the care-leaver, and if not, what do you think caused the distance?
- What are the needs of foster parents caring for care-leavers?
- Please recommend strategies that will promote family ties between foster care leaver(s) and foster parent(s).

## **CAN I WITHDRAW FROM THIS STUDY EVEN AFTER HAVING AGREED TO PARTICIPATE?**

Participating in this study is voluntary and you are under no obligation to consent to participate. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a written consent form. You are free to withdraw at any

time and without giving a reason, and if you feel any discomfort while sharing your experiences, the researcher is obliged to refer you for counselling for debriefing.

### **WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?**

The benefit of the study is that the participants will be able to share their experiences of the causes of relationship breakdown between foster parents and care-leavers so that appropriate planning that caters to their specific needs can be developed to foster long-lasting family bonds and produce responsible adults who were in the foster care system. The research will provide a clear and deeper understanding of their everyday challenges, which will ensure that support is provided to them as needed.

### **ARE THERE ANY NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES FOR ME IF I PARTICIPATE IN THE RESEARCH PROJECT?**

There are no risks associated with participating in this study. However, sharing your lived experiences may evoke some emotions. You will retain the right to withdraw at any stage of the research process without any consequence and if you feel any discomfort while sharing your experiences, the researcher is obliged to refer you for counselling for debriefing.

### **WILL THE INFORMATION THAT I CONVEY TO THE RESEARCHER AND MY IDENTITY BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?**

You have the right to insist that your name is not recorded anywhere and that no one, apart from the researcher and identified members of the research team, know about your involvement in this research. Confidentiality will only be breached if it is in your best interest, such as debriefing with the identified counsellor if you become emotional while sharing your experiences or answering personal questions. Your answers will be given a pseudonym, and you will be referred to in this way in the data, any publications, or other research reporting methods such as conference proceedings.

Your answers may be reviewed by people responsible for ensuring that research is done properly, including the supervisor, transcriber, external coder, and members of the research ethics review committee. The data obtained from this research study may be used for other purposes, such as a research report, journal articles and/or conference proceedings, but individual participants will not be identifiable, thus maintaining your privacy.

### **HOW WILL THE RESEARCHER(S) PROTECT THE SECURITY OF DATA?**

Hard copies of your answers will be stored in a locked cupboard at the researcher's private residence for a period of five years and will also be stored on a computer encrypted with a password for future research or academic purposes. If the data needs to be used again it will be subjected to further research ethics review and approval if applicable. If the time to destroy the information provided by the participants has come, hard copies will be shredded, and electronic copies will be permanently deleted from the computer's hard drive.

### **WILL I RECEIVE PAYMENT OR ANY INCENTIVES FOR PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY?**

You will not receive any payment or any other incentive for your participation in the study. Your participation remains voluntary.

### **HAS THE STUDY RECEIVED ETHICS APPROVAL?**

This study has received written approval from the Research Ethics Review Committee of the College of Human Sciences, Unisa. A copy of the approval letter can be obtained from the researcher if you so wish.

### **HOW WILL I BE INFORMED OF THE FINDINGS/RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH?**

If you wish to be informed of the final research findings, please contact **Andiswa Gova** on **081 4424 905** or email her at **67061001@mylife.unisa.ac.za**.

Should you have concerns about how the research has been conducted you may contact the student's supervisor **Dr. Sandile Dhludhlu** on **012 429 4285** or email him at [dhludsl@unisa.ac.za](mailto:dhludsl@unisa.ac.za). You can also contact the research ethics chairperson **Prof KJ Malesa** on **012 429 6054** or email her at [maleskj@unisa.ac.za](mailto:maleskj@unisa.ac.za).

Thank you for taking time to read this information sheet and for participating in this study.

Thank you.

**Andiswa Gova**



**Appendix 5: Consent to participate in the study**

**Appendix 5(a): Consent to participate in the study (Foster parents)**

**Research title:** Exploring the causes of the relationship breakdown between foster parent(s) and care-leaver(s) after turning 21

**Researcher:** Andiswa Khanyiswa Noluvo Gova

I..... (participant’s name), volunteer to take part in the research project conducted by Andiswa Khanyiswa Noluvo Gova, a student from Unisa.

I understand that I am not forced to take part in the study, and I am allowed to withdraw from the study at any time. The researcher has explained the purpose and nature of the study to me before taking part and I am prepared to participate.

I understand that the information gathered will remain confidential, and my name will not be quoted in the study.

Furthermore, I am aware that the findings of this study will be processed into a research report, journal publication, or conference proceedings, and that my participation will be kept confidential unless otherwise specified.

I agree for the interview to be audio-recorded, and that I can request a copy of the informed consent agreement.

I have read and understood the explanation provided to me. I will answer all the questions to my satisfaction, and I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

**Participant’s Name and Surname**.....

**Participant’s Signature**..... **Date**.....

**Researcher’s Name and Surname**.....

**Researcher’s Signature**..... **Date**.....

**Appendix 5(b): Consent to participate in the study (Care-leavers)**

**Research title:** Exploring the causes of the relationship breakdown between foster parent(s) and care-leaver(s) after turning 21

**Researcher:** Andiswa Khanyiswa Noluvo Gova

I..... (participant’s name) volunteer to take part in the research project conducted by Andiswa Khanyiswa Noluvo Gova, a student from Unisa.

I understand that I am not forced to take part in the study, and I am allowed to withdraw from the study at any time. The researcher has explained the purpose and nature of the study to me before taking part and I am prepared to participate.

I understand that the information gathered will remain confidential, and my name will not be quoted in the study.

Furthermore, I am aware that the findings of this study will be processed into a research report, journal publication or conference proceedings, and that my participation will be kept confidential unless otherwise specified.

I agree for the interview to be audio-recorded, and that I can request a copy of the informed consent agreement.

I have read and understood the explanation provided to me. I will answer all the questions to my satisfaction, and I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

**Participant’s Name and Surname**.....

**Participant’s Signature**..... **Date**.....

**Researcher’s Name and Surname**.....

**Researcher’s Signature**..... **Date**.....

## **Appendix 6: Data Collection Tool**

### **Appendix 6(a): Data collection tools including questionnaire/interview guide/checklist (Foster parents)**

#### **Biographical information**

**Study Title: The causes of the relationship breakdown between foster parent(s) and care-leaver(s) after turning 21**

#### **INTERVIEW SCHEDULE**

#### **BIOGRAPHIC INFORMATION OF PARTICIPANTS**

- Gender
- Age
- Marital status
- Highest qualification
- Period as a foster parent
- Relationship with a care-leaver before turning 21

#### **Open-ended questions**

- How would you describe your overall experience as a foster parent?
- How did your relationship with the care-leaver evolve over the years?
- At what point did you notice a shift in your relationship with the care-leaver?
- Can you identify specific events or circumstances that contributed to the change?
- What challenges, if any, did you face while fostering the child as they approached adulthood?
- How did those challenges impact your relationship with the care-leaver?
- Please share with me the causes of relationship breakdown between foster parent(s) and youth(s) leaving care.
- What are the social support services available for foster parents caring for youth(s) leaving care?
- What is the role of social workers in strengthening family relationships?

- How would you describe your relationship with the care-leaver after they turned 21?
- Do you remain in contact with the care-leaver, and if not, what do you think caused the distance?
- What are the needs of foster parents caring for care-leavers?
- Please recommend strategies that will promote family ties between care-leaver(s) and foster parent(s).

**Interview checklist**

To do list	Check
Arrange the venue on time for the interview	
Schedule the time for the interview with the participants	
Have a copy of the questions	
Pen and paper should be ready for the notes	
Phone must be fully charged to record the interview	

## **Appendix 6(b): Data collection tools including questionnaire/interview guide/checklist (Care-leavers)**

### **Biographical information**

**Study Title: The causes of the relationship breakdown between foster parent(s) and care-leaver(s) after turning 21**

### **INTERVIEW SCHEDULE**

#### **BIOGRAPHIC INFORMATION OF PARTICIPANTS**

- Gender
- Age
- Highest qualification
- Period out of foster care
- Employment status
- Current living situation

#### **Open-ended questions**

- What was your overall experience like in foster care?
- At what age did you start feeling a change in your relationship with your foster parent(s)?
- How would you describe the relationship with your foster parents before you turned 21?
- Please share with me the causes of relationship breakdown between foster parent(s) and youth(s) leaving care.
- What are the social support services available for youth(s) leaving care?
- Do you feel that the foster care system prepared you for independent living? If not, what was lacking?
- What is the role of social workers in strengthening family relationships?
- What are the needs of the youth(s) leaving care before they leave the foster care system?
- Please recommend strategies that will promote family ties between foster care leaver(s) and foster parent(s).
- Do you think the foster care system should provide continued support for care-leavers after they turn 21? Why or why not?

## Interview checklist

To do list	Check
Arrange the venue on time for the interview	
Schedule the time for the interview with the participants	
Have a copy of the questions	
Pen and paper should be ready for the notes	
Phone must be fully charged to record the interview	

## Appendix 7: Ethical clearance



College of Human Sciences\_CREC

Date: 24/06/2024

Dear: Mrs Andiswa Khanyiswa Noluvo Gova

NHREC Registration # : (Rec-240816052)  
Ref # : 3825  
Name: Mrs Andiswa Khanyiswa Noluvo Gova  
Student # : 67061001

**Decision: Ethics Approval from 24 June 2024 to 23 June 2025**

**Researcher:** Mrs Andiswa Khanyiswa Noluvo Gova

725 Ultog Avenue Geluksdal

Brakpan

67061001@mylife.unisa.ac.za 0814424905

**Supervisor:** Dr Sandile Dhludhlu dhludsi@unisa.ac.za

**EXPLORING THE CAUSES OF THE RELATIONSHIP BREAKDOWN BETWEEN FOSTER PARENT(S) AND CARE-LEAVER(S) AFTER TURNING 21**

**Qualification:** MSW

Thank you for the application for research ethics clearance by the College of Human Sciences\_CREC for the above-mentioned research study. Ethics approval is granted for one year.

The **medium-risk application** was **reviewed** by the College of Human Sciences\_CREC on **24 June 2024** in compliance with the Unisa Policy on Research Ethics and the Standard Operating Procedure on Research Ethics Risk Assessment.

The proposed research may now commence with the provisions that:

1. The researcher(s) will ensure that the research project adheres to the values and principles expressed in the UNISA Policy on Research Ethics.
2. Any adverse circumstance arising in the undertaking of the research project that is relevant to the ethicality of the study should be communicated in writing to the College of Human Sciences\_CREC.
3. The researcher(s) will conduct the study according to the methods and procedures set out in the approved application.
4. Any changes that can affect the study-related risks for the research participants, particularly in terms of assurances made with regards to the protection of participants' privacy and the confidentiality of the data, should be reported to the Committee in writing, accompanied by a progress report.

5. The researcher will ensure that the research project adheres to any applicable national legislation, professional codes of conduct, institutional guidelines and scientific standards relevant to the specific field of study. Adherence to the following South African legislation is important, if applicable: Protection of Personal Information Act, no 4 of 2013; Children's act no 38 of 2005 and the National Health Act, no 61 of 2003.
6. Only de-identified research data may be used for secondary research purposes in future on condition that the research objectives are similar to those of the original research. Secondary use of identifiable human research data requires additional ethics clearance.
7. No field work activities may continue after the expiry date (**23 June 2025**). Submission of a completed research ethics progress report will constitute an application for renewal, for Ethics Research Committee approval.

**Additional Conditions**

1. Disclosure of data to third parties is prohibited without explicit consent from Unisa.
2. De-identified data must be safely stored on password protected PCs.
3. Care should be taken by the researcher when publishing the results to protect the confidentiality and privacy of the university.
4. Adherence to the National Statement on Ethical Research and Publication practices, principle 7 referring to Social awareness, must be ensured: "Researchers and Institutions must be sensitive to the potential impact of their research on society, marginal groups or individuals, and must consider these when weighing the benefits of the research against any harmful effects, with a view to minimising or avoiding the latter where possible." Unisa will not be liable for any failure to comply with this principle.

**Note**

The reference number 3825 should be clearly indicated on all forms of communication with the intended research participants, as well as with the Committee.

Kind regards,



Prof Khatija Khan  
Chair of College of Human Sciences\_CREC  
E-mail: khankb@unisa.ac.za



Professor Onwoyo Bosire Onyancha  
Executive Dean / By delegation from the Executive Dean of College of Human Sciences\_CREC  
E-mail: onyanob@unisa.ac.za

## Appendix 8: Letter from language editor

House 367

Hex River Lifestyle Estate

Waterkloof East Ext 12

Rustenburg 0299

15/09/2025

This is to certify that the mini-dissertation entitled

**EXPLORING THE CAUSES OF THE RELATIONSHIP BREAKDOWN BETWEEN FOSTER  
PARENT(S) AND CARE-LEAVER(S) AFTER TURNING 21**

Submitted by **ANDISWA KHANYISWA NOLUVO GOVA**

**STUDENT NUMBER: 67061001**

For the degree of **MASTER OF SOCIAL WORK**

At the **UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA**

Has been edited for language by

Mary Helen Thomas (B.Sc. Hons. PGCE)



Email: [thomashelen212@gmail.com](mailto:thomashelen212@gmail.com)

Cell: 072 242 9066

## Appendix 9: Turnitin report

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