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IS THE DEVELOPMENTAL SOCIAL WELFARE APPROACH TO CHILD PROTECTION SERVICES WORKING? VOICES OF CHILDREN, FAMILIES AND SOCIAL WORKERS IN EASTERN CAPE, SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

Decades of research have highlighted the challenges facing child protection services in a developmental approach. The aim of the article is to explore whether the developmental social welfare approach contributes to an improvement of child protection services. A descriptive case study design was applied in the Eastern Cape province, South Africa. The findings revealed limited knowledge among social work practitioners about the implementation of the developmental social welfare approach. The findings also revealed an overwhelmed child protection system that lacks coordinated and integrated services. It is recommended that child protection services be divided into prevention, early intervention and statutory services.

Keywords: vulnerable children; Children’s Act of 2005; child protection social workers; developmental social welfare approach; statutory social work

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Child protection social work in South Africa is not for the fainthearted. Headlines like “Eastern Cape woman gets 17 years in jail for beating baby with peach tree stick” (Mitchely, 2021 [News 24, 28 May 2021]), “Eastern Cape man faces two life sentences for raping and impregnating his stepdaughter” (Fisher, 2021 [Eyewitness News, 27 August 2021]), and “Teacher arrested after assaulting Grade 3 student” (Sobuwa, 2021 [Sowetan Live, 5 November 2021]) are common. These are just a few examples of the trauma that children face daily, which in turn also has an impact on the child protection social work environment in South Africa. This *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 2023: 59(2)

traumatising and often debilitating work environment affects child protection social workers not only in the Eastern Cape, but also in all the other provinces in South Africa.

Child protection services can be defined as services rendered to children who are at risk of abuse and neglect, and who need care and protection as stipulated in Section 150 of the Children's Act (RSA, 2006). One of the key roles of social workers in child protection services is to protect children, and they do so through providing preventative services as well as pre-statutory and statutory intervention, which are enshrined in the Children's Act (RSA, 2006) and grounded in the South African Constitution (RSA, 1996). In South Africa, child protection can be characterised as both explicit and inconspicuous in safeguarding the child from violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation (African Child Policy Forum, 2013; UNICEF, UNHCR, Save The Children & World Vision, 2012). In addition, child protection systems are interdisciplinary by nature, necessitating interactions among diverse professions and structures. Despite a strong commitment to strengthening child protection systems, services are limited in all communities across South Africa but especially in the Eastern Cape.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child became the first legally binding international treaty to affirm human rights for all children (UN, 1989). South Africa signed the treaty in 1993 and ratified it on 16 June 1995. In 1994, the South African government adopted the developmental approach to social welfare. In addition, when the White Paper on Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) (RSA, 1994) was released in 1995, it sought to transform South Africa by meeting basic community needs, developing human resources, building the economy, and democratising the state and society (RSA, 1997:15). What is required in a developmental paradigm is that traditional social work services are rendered from a strengths-based perspective within a developmental approach. Essentially, these services should be provided to integrate and promote social and economic development (Midgley, 1996). This implies that social workers must move away from being reactive to social problems and rather work towards adopting a proactive attitude when involved in prevention-oriented programmes (Chavalala, 2016). Van Niekerk and Mathews (2019) argues that a proactive attitude in child protection translates into prevention, early intervention and family reunification services, as well as child court proceedings and enforcement of court orders. The policies currently utilised in child protection services, such as the Integrated Service Delivery Model (ISDM) (DSD, 2006), and the White Paper for Social Welfare (RSA 1997), ensure that social workers must firstly focus on preventative services and early intervention services before statutory services to implement a developmental policy for the delivery of social work services. The reality regarding the day-to-day services conducted by child protection social workers in non-governmental organisations (NGOs) is that the majority of child protection services are statutory in nature and NGOs do not have sufficient funding to focus on early prevention services (Herselman, 2018). Budlender and Proudlock (2011) and Lombard (2008) concur that organisations are facing significant difficulties regarding the drastic shortage of social workers, which makes it costly for them to deliver efficient preventions or early intervention child protection services.

In a child protection policy brief, Jamieson, Sambu and Mathews (2017) argue that in practice the child protection system is failing to protect children. Social workers manage cases poorly

because of the high demand for services, which results in the failure to identify children at risk. The Children's Act (RSA, 2006) is a strong piece of legislation that has been ineffectively implemented (Jamieson, Sambu & Mathews, 2017). Although progress has been made in the implementation of a *developmental social welfare approach (DSWA)*, many challenges are still encountered daily since the adoption of the White Paper for Social Welfare in 1997 (Lombard & Wairire, 2010). Furthermore, whilst there is much debate about children's rights, little attention has been devoted to the actual implementation of the DSW approach to child protection.

One of the challenges that make it difficult to implement a DSW (*developmental social welfare*) approach is the escalated levels of violence against children, which requires a process of evaluating the risks to a child's safety, often resulting in the need for statutory services (UNICEF, 2020). These statutory or legal processes are guided by the Children's Act (RSA, 2006), which requires legal case management and a multidisciplinary approach. Social workers in NGOs are often expected to perform statutory social work and implement prevention, and intervention programmes. Many other authors have also found that inadequate funding leads to an inability to address the structural constraints such as lack of human capital and resources, lack of basic organisational resources such as vehicles or fuel to conduct home visits, and a burdensome caseload (Schiller, 2015; Strydom, 2010; Strydom, Spolander, Engelbrecht & Martin, 2017). Because of these limitations, there is a major emphasis on statutory services and crisis management (Strydom, Schiller & Orme, 2020). This results in critical case care which turn into a bureaucratic approach that lacks an empathetic response and leaves services fragmented (Agere & Tanga, 2017; Agere, Tanga & Kang'ethe, 2017; Hope & van Wyk, 2018; Lizano & Barak 2015; Lombard, 2008; Mathews, & Martin, 2016; Matthias, 2015; Ndonga, 2014; Patel & Hochfeld, 2011; Schmid, 2012; Schmid, 2014; Strydom, 2010; van Huyssteen & Strydom, 2016; Vetfuti, Goliath & Perumal, 2019).

It is thus evident from the literature that in the past 28 years of democracy, the developmental social welfare approach has been questioned by various researchers (Cornerstone Economic Research, 2018; Jamieson, Matthews & Rohrs, 2018; Patel, 2015; Skelton & Proudlock, 2013). For example, van der Walt (2018) is of the opinion that the developmental approach to child protection is so far removed from the actual field realities of child protection in South Africa that both researchers and practitioners should start to focus on developing an approach to child protection services that is tailored to meet the needs of children and families. However, Devereux (2021) states that despite decades of criticism, child protection services within a developmental approach continue to gain popularity among policymakers.

Rutter (2012) claims that the gap between implementation of the DSWA and positive outcomes is politically contentious and difficult to enforce. Given the reference to the implementation challenges of the DSW approach to child protection, the researcher undertook a study that took heed of the voices of child protection social workers, families and children in alternative care in the Eastern Cape of South Africa to determine if and how their needs are met through a DSWA.

CONTEXTUALISING THE DEVELOPMENTAL SOCIAL WELFARE APPROACH TO CHILD PROTECTION IN SOUTH AFRICA

Child protection services in South Africa are steered by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (African Union, 1990). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989) is the most widely known and ratified human rights treaty outlining the rights of all children. This came into force in 1990 and established a new legal framework in which children are no longer viewed as objects of compassion or pity, but as subjects of human rights under international law. Regionally, South Africa ratified the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (African Union, 1990) in 2000. The African National Congress (ANC) adopted the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) in 1994 as a policy framework for integrated and coherent socio-economic progress. The RDP has served as a basis for policy makers across a broad spectrum of initiatives, including social assistance (Lombard, 2008; Gray, 1998). The RDP identified integrating social and economic development as a critical task for the new government. However, the scope of this task was reduced when the government adopted the neoliberal capitalist macroeconomic policies of growth, employment and redistribution (GEAR) in 1996 (United Nations Development Programme, 2019).

Specific guidelines have been developed to put the White Paper for Social Welfare (RSA, 1997) into practice, including the Financial Policy for Development-Related Social Services (RSA, 1999), which was approved for implementation in October 2004 and came into effect in April 2005. The Department of Social Development is responsible for meeting the constitutional and statutory obligations for the provision of social services to ensure that the best possible services are delivered. This policy was developed to guide the country's response to the financing of service providers in the social sector. In addition, the Integrated Service Delivery Model (DSD, 2006) defined the relationship between government and the NPO sector.

Other national legislation designed to guide the protection of vulnerable children includes the Children's Act (RSA, 2006). This Act seeks to fulfil the country's obligation regarding the welfare of children in accordance with international conventions and regional charters. It is noted that the South African government has developed policy and legislation after 1994 that includes all children in South Africa. Not only was the legislation changed, but also the approach to the way that social services should be rendered was changed from a residual approach to a developmental approach.

Looking at the DSWA, Patel (2015) encapsulated five central themes, namely a rights-based approach; harmonising of social and economic policies; democracy and participation; collaborative partnerships; and the bridging of the micro-macro divide. As a *rights-based approach to social welfare*, developmental social welfare emphasises socio-economic rights and strategies, including the right to social assistance and development, and strategies to improve the lives of poor people and communities (RSA, 2021). In child protection services this refers to the fact that all children should be protected and should receive social welfare services, especially services that assist them to achieve their educational goals, which ultimately contributes to the socio-economic development of the country. Section 28 of the *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk, 2023: 59(2)*

Constitution 1996) provides an important benchmark in the protection of children in South Africa, as principles derived from international law on children's rights are now enshrined as the highest law of the land. *Economic development* at a macro level frequently advantages a few and neglects the welfare of the majority. The DSWA provides that economic development should benefit children and families, notably reducing 'mass poverty and inequality' (Patel, 2005:103). It would seem that in order to deal with the problems facing the large proportion of poor and unemployed families in the country, the South African government must accept transformation as a priority for its policies and programmes (Nieman, 2006).

Democracy and participation in social and economic development are key premises for the implementation of a developmental approach to social welfare in South Africa (Patel, 2015). In child protection services, the principle of child participation is of paramount importance in dealing with child protection matters. Child participation is a fundamental human right acknowledged in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989). This principle is also instrumental in the interpretation and execution of all other children's rights (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009), affording it a particularly important place in terms of the Convention as a whole (Sutherland, 2014). It is thus imperative that children should always be afforded the opportunity to participate in matters concerning their welfare (Schiller, 2015).

The DSW approach to collaboration embraces the *social development partnership* and could thus be referred to as *welfare pluralism*. Welfare pluralism calls upon the state, civic society, the private sector, communities and individuals to work together in collaborative partnerships to promote social development. Developmental social welfare policy views the meeting of the needs of marginalised people as a national and collective responsibility (DSD, 2006; Patel, 2015; RSA, 1997). In child protection services it is required that a more integrated approach be adopted between the state, civic society, the private sector, communities, children and families (Strydom, Schiller & Orme, 2020).

Bridging this gap is a response to a historical division between *micro services* and *macro interventions*. Patel (2005) discusses this in relation to social injustice, affirming that we should not debate whether we should be helping individuals who have been victimised (micro) versus whether we should be working to change the systems of injustice (macro). Instead, we should recognise the need for both micro and macro interventions. Patel (2005:110) concludes that developmental social welfare "requires an integration of methods and levels of intervention to address the complex dynamics of change in the changing local and global scenario".

Patel (2015) argues that developmental social welfare is based on the idea of developing human potential and promoting ownership and participation in decision-making. Furthermore, Midgley and Conley (2010) emphasises that change is central to developmental social work. However, change in individual functioning is secondary to change in the social environment in which the individual lives. Although Midgley and Conley (2010) argue that particular attention should be devoted to changing people's everyday circumstances and environments, such as creating jobs and empowering communities for sustainable development and productivity, the focus is on macro interventions, leading many social workers to believe that there is no place for micro interventions in the developmental approach.

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In the years following the implementation of the White Paper on Social Welfare (RSA, 1997), several debates, disputes and studies emerged alluding to the fact that although the White Paper for Social Welfare (RSA, 1997) mandated that all social services be implemented within a DSWA, there are still implementation challenges and a lack of guidance on how child protection services should be rendered within a developmental paradigm. Schmid (2012) concurs that significant political and legislative achievements have been made and a rights-based approach to social welfare has been promoted. Formal racial discrimination in access to services has been abolished and a nationally integrated welfare system was created for all South Africans (Leibbrandt, Woolard, McEwen & Koep, 2010).

Payne (2005) criticises the DSWA, arguing that this approach pays little attention to the development of integration and rollout of models that should flow into specific areas of social work. Green (2012), though, calls for combining of the analytical understanding of developmental processes with reflexivity to critically reflect on practice and contribute to its development and impact. This call has been addressed by Midgley and Conley (2010) and Patel and Hochfeld (2013), among other leading scholars, and continues to pose a major challenge for practitioners attempting to incorporate the developmental approach into child protection services. Strydom, Schiller and Orme (2020) assert that the multi-layered challenges between positing developmental welfare goals and the actual realisation of these goals in alternative care services for children in South Africa represent a “state of crisis”.

The majority of statutory child protection services focus on micro practices, as social workers are explicitly tasked with the statutory duty to protect children (McFadden, Campbell & Taylor, 2014, Truter, Fouché & Theron, 2017; Truter, Theron & Fouché, 2018). Sibanda and Lombard (2015) hold the view that social workers are often expected to find their own way when delivering child protection services. In addition, Truter and Fouché (2019) maintain that social workers are also expected and required to translate the provisions of the Children’s Act (RSA, 2006) into practical rights for children and their families. Alpaslan and Schenk (2012) assert that social workers in South Africa still face the same challenges they were faced with two decades ago, which hinders delivering services to children in need of care. Ngwenya (2011) submits that the child protection system is moving away from a developmental approach back to a social remedial approach to welfare services.

The evidence of the implementation of child protection services as part of a developmental approach, which has been growing over the years, raises the question of whether the services contribute to improving the lives of vulnerable children and families, or whether it is merely an approach that is “absent from the social development literature” (van Breda, 2018:66). The question, therefore, remains what practical solutions are needed to implement child protection services within a developmental approach to strengthen and support families, and to create a space in which children can feel safe in their families. If the government continues to create policies and guidelines that do not produce viable application solutions, the developmental approach will remain a valueless approach that leaves children destitute. Van Breda (2018) insists that individuals and families continue to experience a wide range of traumas and challenges that cannot be addressed through macro or socioeconomic interventions alone. The gap between the goals and aspirations of development assistance, on the one hand, and the

actual realisation of tangible changes in transforming welfare services, on the other hand, to improve the quality of services for children in alternative care remains a major challenge.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research approach and design

This article explores whether the DSWA contributes to the improvement of services in the child protection system. In the qualitative research methodology, the descriptive case study design was utilised to explore the views and experiences on the implementation of the developmental approach in child protection services. Qualitative research views social reality as ever changing, based on individual creation and deductive interpretation of the phenomenon (Silverman, 2020). This descriptive case study sought to analyse the course of events after a period of time, such as the implementation of the DSW approach to child protection, through participants' perceptions and experiences in a particular case (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Schurink, Fouché & de Vos, 2011).

Population

Because the study was qualitative in nature, the population of the study consisted of all role-players who form part of direct social service delivery during child protection services. These include:

- Social workers from both governmental (Department of Social Development) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs);
- Children in Child and Youth Care Centres (CYCC);
- Biological parents of children who were removed from their parents;
- Foster parents;
- Directors of both government (Department of Social Development) and non-governmental organisations.

The population referred to in the study all resided in the Eastern Cape. The Eastern Cape is divided into six district municipalities, which are further divided into 31 local municipalities. It covers an area of 168,966 km² and has 6,996,976 residents. The Eastern Cape is South Africa's second-largest province by area and has the third largest population. Four municipalities were purposively selected, namely Amathole District Municipality, Joe Gqabi District Municipality, Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality, and Nelson Mandela Bay Metropolitan Municipality.

Sampling

The participants who informed this study were drawn from a research population of children, biological parents, foster parents, social workers and social work directors. The total sample size was 64 participants, as indicated in Table 1 below. From each municipality, two service areas were selected, comprised of a combination of deep rural areas, semi-urban areas and urban areas. In the Amathole Municipality, Butterworth and Komga were selected, whilst in the Joe Gqabi Municipality, Cradock and Ugie were selected. In Buffalo City Municipality, East London and Mtdansane were selected, and in Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality,

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Gqerberha and Bethalsdorp were selected. Purposive sampling was used to identify the most relevant participants for the study (Nieuwenhuis, 2016).

Table 1: Sample distribution

SAMPLE	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS	MUNICIPALITY
Children in Child and Youth Care Centres	13	Amathole District Municipality; Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality
Biological parents	8	Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality; Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality
Foster care parents	27	Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality; Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality; Joe Gqabi Municipality, and Amathole Municipality
Social workers working in child protection services	11	Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality; Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality; Joe Gqabi Municipality and Amathole Municipality
Social Work Directors of both government departments and of non-governmental organisations	5	Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality; Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality; Joe Gqabi Municipality and Amathole Municipality
Total	64	Four Municipalities

Ethical approval to conduct the study was received from the University of Fort Hare Research Ethics Committee (UREC) prior to conducting any empirical research. The ethical considerations that apply to all types of research in the social sciences provide the principles that govern acceptable professional behaviour to which all researchers should adhere (Babbie, 2016). These considerations include privacy and confidentiality, informed consent, permission to conduct research, avoidance of deception, researcher integrity, and avoidance of harm. Participants were made aware that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time. In addition, assent was obtained from all the children that participated in the study.

Data collection and analysis

Three data collection methods (semi-structured interview schedule, a focus group discussion and in-depth interviews) were utilised. Semi-structured as well as in-depth interviews were conducted as they enabled the researcher to engage in dialogue with the participants, which allowed for the exploration of participants' thoughts, feelings and beliefs, as indicated in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Data collection instruments

DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENTS	SAMPLE
Semi-structured interviews	Thirteen (13) children in Child and Youth Care Centres Eight (8) biological parents of children who were removed from their parents Seventeen (17) foster care parents
Focus group discussions	Three (3) social workers in child protection services Eight (8) social workers in child protection services Ten (10) foster care parents
In-depth interviews	Five (5) social work directors of both government and non-governmental organisations.

Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data from 13 children who were in Child and Youth Care Centres (CYCC) and the biological parents of children who were removed from their parents. The interviews with the child participants were more time-consuming in that questions needed to be explained in a way that suited their level of understanding. The researcher contacted the social welfare offices and submitted official letters to the Child and Youth Care Centres managed by these offices, requesting permission to interview children in alternative care. In addition, the researcher requested formal permission to interview the children from the directors of the CYCC and from parents. In cases where parents were not available, directors had to provide official permission to conduct interviews. All children assented to being interviewed. Interviews with child participants were conducted at the CYCCs. The majority of children were interviewed under the trees at the centre as centres often do not allow for much privacy. Interviews lasted about 45-60 minutes.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather data from eight (8) biological parents. Interviews were conducted in the service office and they lasted 45-90 minutes. Semi-structured interviews were also used to gather data from seventeen (17) foster care parents. In cases where the foster care parents were unable to attend an interview at the office, the researcher requested a home address and or phone number. Appointments were then secured with the participants at a venue and time suitable for them.

Focus group discussions were conducted with ten (10) foster parents. The child protection social workers invited the researcher to attend a foster care support meeting that was scheduled so that the researcher could meet the foster care parents. An explanation of the focus group was provided, including the purpose of the focus group discussion. Participants sat in an office of the child protection social workers and the focus group discussion lasted 2 hours. Two focus group discussions were held with social workers. The first group discussion was held with three social workers in Amathole Municipality. The second group discussion was conducted with eight social workers in the Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality. The focus group discussions lasted between 90 and 120 minutes.

In-depth interviews were conducted with five social work directors and lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. An in-depth interviews enables and are motivated by the desire to learn everything the participant can share about the research topic. Questions and follow up on the responses of *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk, 2023: 59(2)*

interviewees in an endeavour to extract as much information as possible from a single person (Morris, 2015).

The data recordings were transcribed manually into text format by the researcher soon after each interview, with the benefit of simultaneously familiarising the researcher with the data (Fouché & Geyer, 2021). Data were analysed using thematic analysis by identifying themes and subthemes within the data collected. Transcripts were reviewed by all the researchers, which ensured rigour and trustworthiness (Holloway & Wheeler, 2013). To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, the criteria of credibility, transferability, reliability and confirmability were used. In addition, triangulation enriched the study by providing a variety of datasets to explain different aspects of how child protection is rendered in a DSWA. The researcher compared the digital recordings with the field notes to enhance the credibility of the findings.

FINDINGS

The developmental social welfare approach is organised around five central themes, namely a rights-based approach; harmonisation of social and economic policies; democracy and participation; collaborative partnerships; and the bridging of the micro-macro divide. These aspects were utilised to analyse the statutory services stipulated in the Children's Act and are based on the DSW approach to child protection. The research findings are presented under five major themes, which were derived from the data collected. Several sub-themes are included under each major theme. To aid the presentation of data in the following sections, verbatim statements from the participants are used.

Theme 1: Impediments to implementation of the social developmental welfare approach

Knowledge of the social developmental welfare approach is essential for social workers when delivering developmental services to their clients. Two sub-themes emerged from the interviews and focus group discussions regarding the impediments to implementation of the DSWA, namely limited theoretical knowledge and an imbalance between the different levels of service delivery in child protection services.

Subtheme 1.1: Limited knowledge of the DSWA

Most social worker participants had some understanding of the approach, but other participants struggled to conceptualise how it differed from old approaches (pre-1997). Participants were not able to clearly define what the developmental approach entailed, and it became apparent that participants had limited knowledge regarding the implementation of the DSWA. The inadequate responses raised the question of whether social workers had a full comprehension on what developmental social work entails. Some recognised that the approach was designed to assist the most vulnerable population and reduce poverty. One participant remarked: *“the developmental social welfare talks about, you know, how to get people out of poverty. But it's not working. People and communities are struggling more than ever before”*. Some participants indicated that they were unsure just how this DSWA actually worked.

Some thought it was merely a policy document designed by policy makers but with little relevance for day-to-day social work services. One participant remarked that: *“I think the Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk, 2023: 59(2)*

DSWA gets lost here, because it becomes an administrative process instead of doing the actual work". Clearly, there was some familiarity with its terms, and a recognition of the importance of the stipulations of the White Paper on Social Welfare (RSA, 1997). However, they lacked guidance on how to implement the DSWA. This resonates with the point made by Patel and Hochfeld (2008), who note that social workers lack knowledge of the practical application of the DSWA, and this sets them up for failure in using this approach to child protection.

Subtheme 1.2: Imbalance between levels of service delivery

The majority of social worker participants remarked that the DSWA was not being implemented in alternative care. They expressed the view that the increase in child abuse and neglect cases resulted from their own inability to provide prevention and early intervention services. One participant remarked:

I am working in an NGO and we do daily removals of children in need of care. The process is time consuming and there is no time for prevention. Most of the time when cases are referred to the social worker, preventative or early intervention services are too late.

A child participant remarked: *"The social worker that placed me here never visit. She always say she is too busy"*. It became apparent during the focus group discussions with the social workers that lack of human resources contributed to the high caseloads that social workers had to manage. It was equally apparent that social workers were inundated with administrative procedures, which clearly overwhelmed them. Dutschke (2007) also submitted that preventative services are the first to be eliminated owing to other pressing needs. This can be seen as a vicious cycle of the escalating need for services and, fuelled by the intensity of these services, it is often too late to provide preventative and early intervention services.

A few of the foster care participants considered basic needs such as food as a human right and expressed the view that many children in their care are placed with them owing to neglect. A participant said: *"people in poverty don't have food to eat. That is the reality. If a basic right to food is not there, the rest will deteriorate"*. A few children confirmed this by saying that their basic needs could not be met at home. A child participant pointed to the fact that lack of food played a big part in the neglect she experienced: *"I have two sisters and my mom does not work. Sometimes all we have is two potatoes"*. Parents involved in the child protection system are coping with complex issues such as poverty, drug and alcohol abuse, stressful demands of single parenting, mental health and other serious health conditions that have a profound effect on their ability to provide adequate parenting. In cases where families need food parcels, they are assisted and monitored to make sure the family receives the help they need. One of the social worker participants said:

We try to involve our parents in food scheme projects. It gives them something to do and puts food on the table. There are parents out there that really want to raise their children, but the social factors in our country makes it impossible.

The Constitution also spells out the rights of children to legal and socio-economic services protection against maltreatment, neglect, abuse or degradation, as well as to family and parental

care, and to alternative care when removed from the family environment (RSA, 1996). The ideas outlined above informed the White Paper for Social Welfare (RSA, 1997), which advocates a developmental approach to child welfare. This requires that the social welfare response should be in line with a developmental approach, where more children and families have access to prevention and early intervention.

Theme 2: Lack of economic development as a contributor to mass poverty

Midgley (2014) posits that the DSWA advocates harmonisation of social and economic development. Van der Berg, Patel and Bridgman (2021) argue that poverty and inequality continue to put great strain on families, which makes it difficult for families to meet the fundamental needs of their family members. In addition, there is growing evidence of how poverty and hunger impair families' mental health, placing a severe burden on them. The DSWA should ensure that economic development benefits children and families by reducing mass poverty and inequality. It would seem that in order to deal with the problems arising from the large proportion of poor and unemployed families in the country, the South African government must accept transformation as a priority for its policies and programmes (Nieman, 2006).

Subtheme 2.1: Overreliance on government support

Despite progress in reducing the impact of deprivation on many of its poorer citizens, South Africa is still plagued by high levels of unemployment, particularly among its youth, and widespread dissatisfaction with the pace and quality of basic service delivery (Burger, Burger & Rossouw, 2012). It became clear from the findings of the current study that many families experience the hardships of poverty and unemployment and that this contributes to an overreliance on government support. A social worker participant remarked:

Our client cannot find employment and they are unable to provide for their children. This is one of the leading causes why children are neglected. Our government is not doing enough to provide families with employment. Providing grants only creates dependency and people don't aim for employment.

Patel and Hochfeld (2012) are of the view that economic development alone is not enough to help people escape poverty. One parent participant remarked: *"My child is better off in foster care. I know she gets family support that I can't provide her with"*. This is in line with the view posited by Bernstein and Gray (2010) that the developmental approach to service delivery discourages overreliance on government and encourages active involvement of people in their own development. A biological parent remarked:

It is impossible to find employment and the grant is the only way to put some food on the table. But it's not enough to care for my children too, so they are better off in foster care. At least I know they are cared for.

It is evident that clients within the child protection system are surviving from day to day, making it impossible to be self-reliant, resulting in their dependency on social assistance.

Theme 3: Challenges associated with participating in child protection services

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Johannisen, van Wyk and Yates (2021) draw attention to the complicated process of child participation in child protection services, which has been researched in depth to ensure that participation is promoted at all levels of such services. Their participation is often promoted with reference to Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989). Patel (2005) suggests that welfare and development constituencies must be consulted in decisions that affect them, and that participation of children in alternative care is critical for participation in service delivery.

Subtheme 3.1: Lack of active participation of children

Participation implies a recognition that every child affected by the removal, every parent who had a child removed from their care, and every social worker and foster parent involved in the care of a child is entitled to active, free and meaningful participation (UNICEF, 2007). A child must be an active participant in his or her development (Hodgkin & Newell, 2007). One of the important challenges that children face in child protection social work is exercising their right to be heard because they are dependent on adults for their care (Lundy, 2007). Child participation is a fundamental human right acknowledged in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989). A child participant expressed her views of living in a CYCC as follows, indicating the value of a family setting, as opposed to a child care centre: *"I enjoyed it more to stay with my family. I had a big sister and brother. I was placed here [CYCC] and miss my family"*. Here, it can be seen how the child participant, in expressing her view of living in a CYCC indicates the value of the small family setting compared to living in a CYCC. According to Venter (2014), participation creates a sense of power and control for children and foster families; participation means children have an opportunity to describe their perspectives on, and experiences of, what is important to them. Moyo (2014) stress the idea that children are social agents and initiators of action by choice, and this is central to the recognition of child participation.

Children who received statutory services and are in alternative care need love, emotional support and the opportunity to express their feelings without fear of stigma and discrimination. A child participant remarked: *"There are too many kids here. I am just another child without a family"*. It became evident that when children are genuinely asked to participate, a true reflection can be established and understood. Adults are reluctant to give effect to this right of children, because they are sceptical of children's capacity to contribute meaningfully to decisions (Steyn & Wolhuter, 2003). A child participant confirmed this by stating: *"I do not know what is going to happen to me, my social worker does not talk to me, only when we have to go to court"*. One of the foster care parent participants noted the lack of participation and preparation before they went to court. The participant said:

The social worker just told me to be at court. Nothing was communicated ahead of time. The child is not prepared and does not understand why he is out of school all day long. It's very disruptive.

This finding makes evident the exclusion of children from preparations where their participation is required. Steyn and Wolhuter (2003) emphasise the importance of involving children in decision-making, as this allows them the opportunity to voice their opinions, which

can be seen as a pedagogically sound and advisable technique when involving children in decision-making affecting them.

Subtheme 3.2: Lack of contact service delivery by child protection social workers

Based on the DSWA, social workers should ensure meaningful participation among the role players such as the biological parents, children and foster parents. Participation implies a recognition that every person is entitled to active, free and meaningful participation in and contribution to civil, economic, social, cultural and political development, through which human rights and fundamental freedoms can be enjoyed (UNICEF, 2007).

It was revealed that biological parents who have children in foster care themselves have complicated lives, with limited support networks to turn to in times of need. These parents need the support of social workers; however, the findings indicate that they do not get the support they need. One said: *“I am able to care of myself with the grant, but I cannot take care of my children with the small amount of money I get from SASSA”* [South African Social Security Agency].”

The findings further indicate that children removed from parental care also experience lack of contact from the social worker, which often creates anxiety and uncertainty about prospects of being reunited with the family in future. One of the child participants noted that *“The social worker that placed me here do not visit me. I do not know if I will see my family again”*. This was corroborated by one of the foster parent participants who stated that:

The social worker was involved when he brought the child to me, and that is where it stopped until he came to fetch the child to return to his family two years later. I had no input, and the child was taken from me without an explanation. I said never again will I foster, it's too painful.

The literature reveals that the alternative care system in South Africa is not coping (Dhludhlu & Lombard, 2017; Kanyane, 2015; Naicker, 2021).

A social worker participant remarked:

There are 356 days in a year. I have more cases than that, which means more than one case per day. It is an impossible task. It is a mistake from our side, we place the child and know he is safe and we only see that child if we go to court. Other than that, only if a problem arises from the family...

It is evident from the findings that children become ‘invisible’ in child protection because of the systemic pressures that practitioners experience, causing them to fail in performing their duties, and leading to inadequate time to make children ‘visible’ (Ferguson, 2017). It was also evident from the findings that the services that were offered to children and their families showed no signs of being informed by developmental principles. Children, biological parents and foster parents were not afforded the opportunity by social workers to participate in matters concerning them; they did not receive services that are seen as a right, and there was no democratic participation or linkage to services that could support the families and children.

Theme 4: Poor collaboration shows disconnect

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Most social workers supported the idea of collaborative partnerships for the benefit of children and their families, yet such partnerships were simply not being set up.

Subtheme 4.1: Uncoordinated services and lack of proper communication

Social worker participants remarked that lack of collaboration between various departments significantly affected service delivery. A social worker participant remarked:

It is a fact that uncoordinated services and lack of proper communication between social workers in different departments can result in a failure to share life and death information about a family's situation. It is essential to identify that these failures have a negative impact on our clients' safety, and we fail our people within the system. Failing our clients is a reflection of problems within the system. Collaboration is not possible if we can't handle the 'back to basics' stuff. Pointless, to say the least.

Findings revealed a complete lack of communication between social workers within different child protection organisations. Great frustration was expressed about the role of the designated social workers and the external social workers, as lack of communication on the progress of reunification resulted in children remaining in facilities for years. Communication, it seemed, was non-existent. One social work director remarked:

Our social workers at the CYCC take it upon themselves to visit the biological family and make sure the children can go to holiday placement because we never hear from the external social worker responsible for those services. It is an impossible task to get them involved.

Subtheme 4.2: Power struggles and political interference

The successful implementation of developmental social welfare services depends on role players who can bring expert knowledge, skills, financial resources and commitment to achieve the desired results (Mudogwa, 2016). One participant remarked: *"The political interference dominated our daily tasks and the power struggle between various governmental departments creates an overall lack of service delivery"*. Another participant revealed: *"I am really not supposed to talk to you. I can get fired if I share the political agenda within the government department"*. Some social worker participants felt that the collaboration between NGOs and the Department of Social Development was far from what it should be. Power struggles and political interference affected working relationships between departments and had a ripple effect on service delivery.

According to Patel (2015), a critical feature of the developmental approach is that government and NGOs should recognise that they share the responsibility to work together and make joint decisions to enhance developmental welfare services; this is clearly not evident from the findings above. It became clear from the findings that taking responsibility to work together in the Eastern Cape to better the lives of children and families was rarely a reality, but a distant ideal for many.

Theme 5: Unequal distribution of services creates divisions

The developmental approach to social welfare attempts to bridge the micro-macro divide in service delivery. In this respect, the policy promotes the enhancement and empowerment of individuals, families, groups and communities by intervening at different levels, using multi-method, community-based and integrated generalist practice interventions (United Nations Development Programme, 2019). In other words, micro interventions aimed at individuals and families are linked with macro interventions aimed at changing the problematic structures and institutions of society, which are caused by social economic injustice.

Subtheme: 5.1 Massive divide between Departments and NGOs

The majority of social worker participants remarked that they were constantly urged to bridge the divide between micro and macro intervention, an essential component of developmental social welfare. One social worker participant noted:

I know they go hand in hand but once again as I said before it [prevention services and statutory services] should be run as two different entities. It can be more specialised and effective if we are not expected to do both, but rather focus on the quality of service that we render.

Yet social workers find it nearly impossible to link the two aspects. Participants did not think it was possible to bridge the divide whilst working within the current structures, and were thus of the opinion that if the structures were changed, if collaboration was made a reality, and if dedicated preventative teams were employed, this linkage might be possible.

One of the social worker participants commented:

Statutory service needs to be separated from prevention and early intervention; however, they are also connected. One cannot work without the other, and we might be able to see those changes in years to come. However, it needs to be carefully planned.

This gap in the literature reinforces Patel and Hochfeld's (2012:698) finding that casework remains the most used method in social work related to child protection services. Van Breda (2018) agrees and posits that if casework continues to be the most used method of practice, then it is important to consider how casework can be reformulated from a more meticulous developmental perspective. Recognising that in theory, statutory social work and early intervention and prevention are inseparable; they nevertheless urged the separation of the functions for a practical purpose. A few social worker participants expressed that the divide between departments and NGOs was so huge that a balance of micro and macro interventions might not be achieved unless dualism is deliberately addressed. A conscious effort is needed to rebalance the role of micro and macro practice and to view them as essential components. This will ensure that all social work practitioners are empowered to meet the needs of those who come to their doors seeking help.

CONCLUSIONS

This article has revealed that child protection services in the Eastern Cape are not delivered in terms of the DSWA. We conclude from the findings that some social workers have limited knowledge of the DSWA, and even where there is some theoretical knowledge, ideas on how to implement it within current frameworks and structures are limited. DSWA is considered mostly a matter of policy, with little applicability to the practical realities that participants faced daily.

Social workers seem not to realise that the escalation of caseloads and service delivery to more children in South Africa is a consequence in the DSWA approach to child protection, as it denotes that the rights-based element of the social development welfare approach is being realised. Thus, DSWA opens up opportunities and rights to service delivery for more children in South Africa. However, as much as it is positive that more children in South Africa are afforded child protection services, it is of great concern that the first contact a child has within child protection services is on the level of statutory services. There is a glaring absence of prevention and early interventions in child protection services.

The developmental approach to child protection must empower individuals, but the increase in economic difficulties in communities creates an over-reliance and over-dependence on government instead of promoting sustainability. In addition, although the aspiration of contributing to their child's welfare is admirable, the reality is an over-reliance on government support, which teaches the poor that a food parcel may solve the immediate problem. The implementation of the DSWA is seen as being more focused on social security, which creates dependability instead of sustainability. The focus in the past decade has predominantly been on social security, to the detriment of other developmental services.

Without the participation of all role players, without contact from child protection social workers, critical issues related to the child's development can create complications in the child's life. The idea that children are social agents and initiators of action by choice is central to the recognition of the need for child participation. The views of children should be respected and considered in all decisions concerning them. People must respect children in alternative care and the government must honour this right by granting children their appropriate status in their families, schools and communities.

One of the factors contributing to lack of contact between the child protection social workers and children is the increase in the demand for services. This high demand for these services creates large backlogs, leaving social workers feeling overwhelmed. It places demands on social workers that they are unable to meet, resulting in their having to prioritise crisis services. Social workers are overburdened with high workloads and the profession suffers from a lack of collaboration and cooperation between government departments, NGOs and other service agencies. Social workers are themselves stressed to the point of being ineffective, and the majority see little chance of implementing the developmental mandate of their jobs. The Eastern Cape is particularly under-resourced, leaving many needy children without essential services and effectively abandoning many to situations of abuse and neglect.

Collaborative partnership will remain just another abstract term used in policy making, neither understood nor practised by those expected to implement it. Given the heavy workloads, lack of material and financial resources and personal/emotional support in an emotionally draining job, this breakdown is more or less to be expected. Social workers seemed frustrated with their inability to meet expectations; they struggle to catch up with workloads and have no time left for either preventative or collaborative work. The divide within the current structures can only be bridged if the structures are changed and if dedicated prevention and early intervention teams are set up. As matters stand now, all are involved in prevention, early interventions and statutory services, and this does not do justice to any of the services or lead to bringing about social change.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To enhance service delivery in child protection through a developmental social welfare approach, there is need for opportunities for specialisation in social work. The child protection field requires a specific and diverse skill set in order to best protect and help children. There should be thorough induction for new social workers so that they know how to link DSWA and child protection social work.

It is thus recommended that social work services for children that need care and protection and who require a legal statutory intervention be separated from those for children placed in foster care and CYCCs. This will prevent the harried and overburdened social workers applying the piecemeal approach currently practised by the majority. Generalised social work training, including practice placement during higher education, does not prepare the social worker for real-world conditions.

The critical issues in the Eastern Cape, as discussed, need more serious attention from those empowered and mandated to create adequate frameworks and infrastructure for the rendering of child protection social work services. Social workers are not sufficiently capacitated to deliver well-planned and organised social work services to children, let alone implement the full range of developmental strategies. Social workers do not apply the principles of developmental social welfare, but practise more of a crisis-oriented approach to children in alternative care. Finally, an investment in child protection that includes both preventive and statutory services will result in improved child protection services, thus reflecting investment in the wellbeing and productivity of all South African citizens.

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