Grandmothers unite: Sharing wisdom and advocacy for the wellbeing and success of foster children

Mulalo Musetsho[1.1], Mimie Sesoko[1.2] and Goitseone Leburu[1.3]

[1.1] *University of South Africa, Department of Social Work, Pretoria, South Africa*
https://orcid.org/0009-0007-3010-9823 ✉ 42289750@mylife.unisa.ac.za

[1.2] *University of South Africa, Department of Social Work, Pretoria, South Africa*
http://orcid.org/0009-0007-5335-1591 ✉ sesokomp@gmail.com

[1.3] *University of South Africa, Department of Social Work, Pretoria, South Africa*
http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7487-200X ✉ leburge@unisa.ac.za

ABSTRACT

A foster care awareness programme (FCAP) can play a critical role in strengthening caregivers' understanding of ways to support vulnerable children under their care. Despite the significance of such programmes, grandmother-headed families face challenges such as managing indiscipline, establishing family values, parenting and addressing health risks. Moreover, there is lack of literature on grandmothers' experiences of FCAPs as an intervention strategy. Using a qualitative approach and a phenomenological research design, 10 grandmothers were purposefully recruited with the aim of developing an in-depth understanding of their experiences of foster care awareness programmes as an intervention strategy. Data were collected through individual, face-to-face semi-structured interviews and analysed using six steps of thematic data analysis. The findings revealed that grandmothers shared experiences and learnt from one another, leading to significant changes in their families' lives, particularly in communication, parenting and financial management. These changes contributed to emotional stability within their households. The study recommends extending foster care programmes to include joint and individual sessions for foster children and their parents. Additionally, social workers are encouraged to invest more time in group and community work as alternative strategies to traditional casework.

Keywords: foster care; foster care awareness; grandmother; intervention; strategy

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Many children in South Africa, whose parents are both deceased, find themselves in precarious and vulnerable situations. In some cases, these children lack any form of parenting as no parents are there to raise them (Dziro & Mhlanga, 2018). In 2012 Statistics South Africa data estimated that there were around 2.3 million orphans living in South Africa, with 1.2 million having lost their fathers, 460,308 having lost their mothers, and 374,520 having lost both parents (Statistics South Africa, 2012). Ten years later, in 2022, South Africa had 2.8 million orphaned children. This accounts for 14% of all children in South Africa and includes children who do not have a living biological mother, father, or both parents. Paternal orphans, those with living their moms, make up most of all orphans (64%) in South Africa. The high number of paternal orphans is linked to higher male mortality rates and the frequent uncertainty regarding a father's status or identity, with around 300,000 children having fathers whose status is unknown, compared to fewer than 40,000 for mothers (Hall, 2023). South African Government News Agency (2023) also reported the highest levels of paternal orphans in all censuses and provinces.

KwaZulu-Natal has the largest child population in South Africa and the highest orphan numbers, with 634,000 children (15% of children in that province) recorded as orphans who have lost a mother, a father or both parents. Orphaning rates in the Eastern Cape (16%) are higher, although the number of children orphaned is lower (408,000). The data released by Statistics South Africa and the General Household Survey (from 2020/2021) found that Gauteng According to South Africa's General Household Survey (2020/2021), Gauteng recorded approximately 154,000 orphans aged 0 to 17 years. This reflects a significant increase of nearly 97% compared to the 2019 figure of 78,000. Orphaning rates in Gauteng province remained stable in 2021 and 2022 (Hall, 2023). The lowest orphaning rates are in the Western Cape (10% of children) (Hall, 2023).

Some of these children are left vulnerable and in need of care and protection, which responsibility often falls to the grandparents as foster parents. The Children's Act 2005 (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 2006), Section 41 defines foster care as an alternative placement that occurs when a child is placed by a children's court order with a suitable person, who then becomes a foster parent to the child. The foster care placement provides an environment that is conducive to the child's growth and development. Foster care is a temporary living situation for children whose parents cannot take care of them. In some instances, children are placed in foster care settings because their families are in a crisis (Casey, 2022).

Kinship care is the preferred placement type for children (Wu et al., 2015). This occurs when children are removed from their homes and placed with their relatives or someone considered close to the family (Wijedasa, 2015) such as grandparents, other extended family members, or unrelated adults with whom they have a close family-like relationship, or close family friends (Wu et al, 2015). Kinship care provision can take place either formally through legal procedures or informally through private family arrangements, which may or may not include statutory prescriptions (Wijedasa, 2015). Kinship care is currently the preferred placement type

for children, because it is considered the "least restrictive", most family-like placement and it is the best interest of the child (Wu et al., 2015).

Kinship care givers need to understand the child's needs, build on their strengths and acknowledge their capacity for resilience in overcoming adversity. The provision of ongoing support is geared towards helping families to manage challenging behaviours and to create stability (Connolly et al., 2017). In kinship care, children are able to maintain connections to their communities, family members and schools, and in the case of non-orphaned children increase the likelihood of eventual reunification with their birth parents (Wu et al., 2015). Despite this, it is not an easy task for grandmothers to care for foster children (Peterson, 2017). Research indicates that grandparents offer support to children who are vulnerable as a result of various factors such as a crisis in the family, death, parental divorce, abandonment and poverty (Murimba, 2020; Uhlenberg & Cheuk, 2010).

Old grandparents who parent adolescents and become full-time caregivers face major challenges with regards to their personal work routine at home and work, as well as their exposure to health risks (Peterson, 2017). Moreover, the grandmother-headed families encounter challenges with communication, dealing with indiscipline, creating new family values and principles, parenting, financial management and dealing with the effects of HIV and AIDS in their families. Research findings from the informal settlement area of Diepsloot community show that these grandmothers have to deal with the problems that foster care children are exposed to such as health and emotional challenges, drug abuse and alcoholism, peer pressure and absence from school (Hohlfeld et al, 2018). These challenges are some of the reasons that prompted the researchers to embark on this research, as there was a dearth of literature that addresses the experiences of the grandmother-headed families in relation to foster care awareness programmes as an intervention strategy.

Historical overview of the foster care awareness programme (FCAP)

The concept of foster care awareness was introduced by President Ronald Reagan in America in 1988. It was used to support all foster parents who had opened their homes to foster children and families in need. This initiative was promoted by the United States government's Office of the Administration for Children and Families, in particular the Children's Bureau (Reagan, 2019). The United States Department of Health and Human Services (2020) states that the United States honours foster care awareness to provide support for children in foster care, foster parents and biological families as a path towards healing. The Human Rights Watch (2014) explains that the foster care awareness programme is a process of creating an enabling environment which will ensure that families are informed and have the ability to care for the children before and after the foster care application. The FCAP was introduced to incorporate a range of aspects in helping grandmothers to cope under challenging circumstances (Kelley et al., 2019).

The Department of Social Development (DSD) in Johannesburg has a number of programmes that are designed to support families who are foster parents, including a foster care awareness programme (FCAP). The concept an FCAP was introduced in the Diepsloot community in 2015 by the DSD Johannesburg Metro Region. Diepsloot is an informal settlement area that

has many orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) under the care of grandmothers. The programme is facilitated and conducted by social workers through a group supervision workshop. The Department of Social Development programmes are structured to empower, educate and assist individuals and communities (DSD, 2015). Furthermore, the DSD has the mandate to promote policies and programming across the board to ensure that the importance of the family as a core unit of society and work to foster family wellbeing is acknowledged, as well as to strengthen and support vulnerable families (RSA, 2021).

The purpose of the FCAP is to give caregivers the skills, knowledge and tools to provide high-quality foster care for children. Grandmothers who are foster caregivers are identified from the social workers existing caseloads and invited to attend group supervision workshops that take place in the Diepsloot community. During the workshop, foster grandmother-headed families are provided with the various skills that are necessary. When caregivers lack skills and knowledge, children may feel abandoned and may express anger towards caregivers (Nesmith & Ruhland, 2011). The FCAP therefore creates a suitable space for learning. The programme acknowledges foster parents, family members, volunteers, mentors, policy makers, child welfare professionals and other members of community who help children in foster care to find permanent homes and connection (Miller, 2020).

Androff (2016) states that human rights provide the agenda that guides policy and practice interventions and assists social workers to develop different strategies, especially those social workers who are engaged in the muddy work of transforming human misery into its highest potential of freedom, compassion and healing. During the FCAP, members of grandmother-headed families share their stories of the death of their children, what was the most difficult part for them, and what they found to be helpful. The death of a child is often a heart-breaking experience that can have a significant impact on parents (Jonas et al., 2018).

Zimbabwe, like other countries in the Southern African region, has suffered significant losses in several ways because of the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), as well as persistent droughts and other environmental challenges. Official statistics state that about 185,000 AIDS-orphaned Zimbabwean children are living under the guardianship of their grandparents (Duri & Marongwe, 2021). Dziro and Mhlanga (2018) state that the death of parents has an impact on the survival strategy of orphans and other vulnerable children. These children are left in the care of family members. It is the researcher's view that this refers to foster care services in families.

In Tanzania, children in need of alternative care belong to the group of vulnerable children that require special attention and protection by the state and the community (Buchumi, 2021). Section 16 of the Tanzanian Law of the Child Act (United Republic of Tanzania, 2009) specifies that a child needs alternative care for a number of different reasons (Buchumi, 2021). The government of Tanzania acknowledges and appreciates that the community plays a critical role in providing for needy children. Furthermore, in Tanzania foster care is treated as family-based alternative care rather than institutional care. Foster care is understood as a requirement for adoption rather than an independent form of alternative care as provided by law (Buchumi, 2021).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A theoretical approach is defined as the application of any empirical theory of social or psychological processes to the understanding of a phenomenon. It can be viewed as the structure which guides thinking and actions (Venter, 2012). It is important for research to be anchored in theoretical framework, because this serves to organise thoughts and ideas most effectively (Crossman, 2020). The theoretical frameworks used for this study were the strength-based perspective and a social development approach. The strength-based approach is related to empowerment practice, resilience theory and capabilities theory, and supports employment and positive ageing (Rapp & Goscha, 2012).

The study adopted the strengths perspective, since every person has some inherent strengths, regardless of the nature of the problem they might be experiencing (Sekudu 2015; Young et al., 2016). Furthermore, this theoretical framework fits into the foster care awareness programme as grandmothers are encouraged to be self-reliant and use available resources to uplift and empower themselves and their families. The strengths-based perspectives discourage a deficit-based approach that assigns disempowering labels to clients and categorises them in terms of pathology (Saleebey, 2013). Through difficult and problematic life experiences, families develop skills and coping strategies that they can utilise to alleviate problematic situations (Saleebey, 2013). The strengths-based perspective takes a relativist stance in emphasising that the practitioner should work in conjunction with the client in identifying the desired goals. Every individual, group, family and community has the strengths and resources that could be marshalled to address the complex dynamics of resolving challenges (Joseph et al., 2020).

Zastrow (2017) states that a social developmental approach, or developmental social welfare, is a process of social change designed to promote the wellbeing of the population as a whole in connection with the dynamic process of economic development. The social development approach was introduced to alleviate poverty and uplift vulnerable populations (Midgley, 2014). It is both a theory and an approach to social work which emphasises the fact that economic development should be combined with social intervention (Midgley, 2014). Sekudu (2015) mentions that the developmental approach encompasses the empowerment of clients, and it can be applied at any level of social work intervention. Mpanza et al. (2021) point out that the social development approach integrates the provision of social services with economic development, and recognises the importance of sustainable development in addressing poverty and unemployment.

The activities of the foster care awareness programme help families with financial management, developing and maintaining a budget, saving funds for tertiary education, and managing month-to-month groceries. The grandmothers worked with the foster children to utilise the skills learned in the programme's sessions. The FCAP introduced changes into the grandmothers' families and helped them grow from strength to strength. Some challenges remained to be addressed at the individual level. The strength-based perspective and the social development approach have been used to build strong and sustainable family values.

METHODOLOGY

Drawing from a phenomenological research design, this study sought to develop an in-depth understanding of the experiences of the grandmothers from their own perspective in relation to their participation in the foster care awareness programmes as an intervention strategy. Through phenomenological research, the researchers gained a profound understanding of human experiences, shedding light on the personal significance and meaning that the grandmothers attached to their experiences with the FCAP (Bachkirova et al., 2020; Bliss, 2016; Wilson, 2015). Ten grandmothers from Diepsloot were purposefully selected to participate in the study. Their selection was based on the research objective, design and target population (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017). Purposive sampling identifies participants representing the pertinent characteristics of a specific population (Babbie, 2011). The recruitment criteria of grandmothers specifically included those who are foster parents, reside in Diepsloot, are 60 years or older, possess a valid court order for fostering, and currently care for at least one foster child. Additionally, only grandmothers who could speak isiZulu, Tshivenda, Sepedi, or Setswana were recruited.

Before the commencement of data collection, home visits were conducted to establish a rapport with the participants for them to feel valued, free, safe and comfortable enough to share their feelings and perspectives. Data were collected using semi-structured individual interviews at the participants' home and were audio recorded. After conducting the interviews, the researchers produced verbatim transcripts and checked them for accuracy. The transcripts were then analysed thematically (Kgadima, 2024). To ensure the trustworthiness of the research findings, Adler's (2022) model precepts were followed, namely 1) show me the theory and 2) show me the methods. All social science research, regardless of its approach or methodology, is guided by a theoretical framework, which should be explicitly stated to ensure transparency and clarity for those reading or utilising the research findings (Adler, 2022). This research based its theoretical foundations on a strength-based perspective and social development approach. These approaches were helpful to develop a rich, in-depth understanding of the grandmothers' experiences with foster care awareness programmes, highlighting their strengths and social support networks. There are numerous ways to ensure methods are trustworthy; this study focused on reflexivity, triangulation and raw data availability.

Reflexivity refers to researchers considering how their own experiences and biases might affect their study, and take responsibility for that impact (Berger, 2015). When doing qualitative research, it is essential to acknowledge and describe the complex relationships between the researcher, participants and the research setting. This self-awareness (reflexivity) helps to ensure the research is credible and reliable (Dodgson, 2019). As social workers, the authors are aware that it is by design that research participants are substantially different from them. Throughout the process of conducting this research and writing this article, they reflected not only on how cultural differences might lead to misunderstanding participants, but also on how their social positions are perceived (class, gender, religion, citizenship status etc.) and might lead them to change what they say or do (Adler, 2022).

Different kinds of triangulation – such as theory triangulation, data triangulation and investigator triangulation – were adopted to make this qualitative research more rigorous and

trustworthy (Bailey, 2018). Theory triangulation entailed using two theories to analyse and interpret data. Data source triangulation was also used to collect data from different types of sources such as grandmothers and the literature (Carter et al., 2014; Morgan, 2024). Another way to increase trustworthiness was making the raw data available to the research participants for checking (Cloutier & Ravasi, 2021). The Research and Ethics Committee of UNISA's Department of Social Work granted ethical clearance (42289750_CREC_CHS_2022). Participants were protected from harm by obtaining informed concern, maintaining confidentiality, carefully managing research information, protecting participants' anonymity, and ensuring that debriefing was available for all participants who needed it.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The discussion is presented under four themes that emerged from the interviews with grandmothers, as detailed in the following section. The themes that emerged from the interviews are grandmothers' understanding of the foster care awareness programme; grandmothers' explanation of the positive and negative sides of the foster care awareness programme; grandmothers' description of the challenges they experience with their foster children; and their accounts of the foster care awareness programme.

Theme 1: Grandmothers' understanding of the foster care awareness programme

This theme focuses on the meaning of the foster care awareness programme as perceived and understood by the grandmothers who were participants in this research. The FCAP addresses the special needs of these grandmothers. Grandmothers raising orphaned grandchildren are confronted with countless challenges which may affect their health, both physically and emotionally (Kelley et al, 2019).

Sub-theme 1.1: Gathering of grandmothers and social workers to share experiences

The foster care awareness programme involves a meeting of grandmothers raising their foster children and collaborating with social workers. The foster care awareness programme brings development in communities because it is aimed at addressing the challenges faced by grandmothers in Diepsloot. Participants stated that the foster care awareness programme protects children from being neglected, violated or abused and helps to maintain order in families and communities at large. In offering the FCAP and supervision, social workers ensure that grandmothers are empowered and educated on their rights and responsibilities in terms of the placement of foster children. This assists in maintaining order in families and communities at large. In rendering foster care awareness programmes and supervision, the social worker must ensure that grandmothers are empowered and educated on their rights and responsibilities in terms of the placement of foster children.

The aim of the foster care awareness programme is to strengthen families and encourage parents to take responsibility for raising their children (Swart 2012). When collaborating with grandmothers, a social worker needs to believe that these grandmothers and their families have strengths, resources, and the abilities to recover from adversity as illustrated by excerpts below.

Foster care awareness is a gathering of grandmothers who are raising their foster children. We share personal wisdom when we meet together. We talk about how children need to go to school, eat well and do good all the time. (Winnie)

*It's a gathering where we get to learn a lot. We talk about how to treat children that don't have parents. We are empowered on how to communicate with our foster children and families. (*Rebecca)

We talk about problems; we comfort and help one another. When we come back our stress levels are lower [than before]. *Because you will say you're living this way and find another person telling you their problems. You come back healed from all the stress, yes, having accepted all things. You will hear other grandmothers say, 'My foster child is doing this and that', then you will realise that all children are like yours. Yes, you come back feeling much better and well. We talk about our foster children's behaviours. You as a parent ... you should accept the children as they are.* (Zandile)

The findings confirm that the foster care awareness programmes are facilitated by social workers through group supervision workshops. Additionally, the responses show that foster parents participate fully and do engage with one another. Maphosa (2022) supports the use of group work as an intervention strategy because it gives group members an opportunity to engage with peers and gain social skills. Through group work, foster parents can share their experiences, gain emotional support and develop a greater acceptance of their children's behaviours, leading to improved wellbeing. These responses support research by Lotty et al. (2021) which found that group work programmes are crucial in foster care, because they help caregivers become more capable of offering the two areas of psychoeducation: reflective engagement, and skill development. Similar findings have been made by Balsells et al. (2017), who demonstrated that group work benefits participants and lessens social isolation, while enhancing social networks and family interactions.

Sub-theme 1.2 Receiving guidance and support on how to care and love foster children

Grandmothers highlighted that, to them, the foster care awareness programme means that they receive guidance and learn how to care for children. The participants expressed that the foster care awareness programme is about guidance and gaining new knowledge on how to live with orphans and vulnerable children, and how to care for them. Guidance and support during FCAP come in the form of structured and organised activities.

Foster care awareness programme is about guidance. Yes, we get guidance and knowledge on how to live with orphans and then how to treat them, how to raise them. To give them love. The kind of love that they must not think of the past when they live with you, thinking of their parents. They must realise that the love they receive is the same as the love they were supposed to be receiving from their deceased parents. (Zandile)

To be able to take care of a child. That the child you live with, you're not supposed to talk to them as if you're shouting at them. You must not be loud, too. When you plan to talk to them, you must see to it that you know you're addressing a child and not an adult... (Mary)

From these excerpts, grandmothers receive guidance and learn how to care for and love children from such a foster care awareness programme. As Saleebey (2013) and Liah (2019) state, the aim of the foster care awareness programme is to explore general knowledge of the foster care system and motivate the foster carers to take care of their children. Receiving such knowledge and guidance is important for the development of children as they navigate through their life stages and challenges. As noted in the excerpts, one participant highlights the importance of giving these children love that makes them feel secure and not dwell on their loss. The goal is to ensure that they receive the same level of affection and care as they would have from their biological parents, helping them heal from past traumas. A study conducted by Desjardins and Leadbeater (2017) found that when children receive emotional support, they adjust positively, and it may help young adults adjust to real-world situations. In their study, Downie et al. (2010) found notable the adaptation skills and resilience of the children living with their grandparents in managing their life experiences.

Theme 2: Grandmothers' explanation of the positive and negative sides of the foster care awareness programme

All the grandmothers were able to identify and explain the positive side of the foster care awareness programme.

Sub-theme 2.1: Assistance with caring for and managing children

Some grandmothers explained how the foster care awareness programme assists them with caring for and managing the children in their foster care. Participants reported that social workers help them because if their children cannot understand, they go to them for assistance; they also seek advice from other grandmothers and they guide each other. Social workers assist them to manage complex situations.

> *The FCAP helps us. If the child cannot understand, you can go to the FCAP and share your challenges then, they will help you. You ask advice from other grandmothers, I need your assistance, the child is out of line, they will assist you on how to handle the situation.* (Betty)

> *It's about advice on how to take care of children. How I should take care of them. I teach them that they should go to school and not do their own thing. That they may be good children in life*, we also need to open bank accounts for our grandchildren and save money for their tertiary education. (Phindile)

The family is a crucial forum for preventative interventions to ensure children's health and reduce the risk of illness, injury and death. Families are the primary vehicle of socialisation (Riesch et al., 2012). Social workers need to provide a parenting skills programme to the grandmother-headed families. A parenting skills programme is defined as one where grandmothers are trained in parenting skills and developing positive interactions with their foster children (Hohlfeld et al., 2018). From the research findings, it is clear that the foster care awareness programme is a family support space which assisted the participants with caring and managing children.

Sub-theme 2.2: Sharing with others and learning how to care for children

Participants indicated in various ways that an important positive side of attending the foster care awareness programme was that they could share with other grandmothers and learn how to care for foster children. Other participants said that the foster care awareness programme is positive, because they acquired intimate knowledge on how to take care of their foster children, which is good.

> *It's alright because the FCAP sessions helped us as members to know what we must do to the child. We must wash clothes for the child to be clean, cook food for the child to eat and do these activities so that they can become responsible. We learn from one another about how to discipline our foster children.* (Zandile)

> *When we meet with the others, we can correct each other, we give each other advice. Yes, just like if I say I want my child home by 10. They would say no, parent – a child must come back home at 7 or 8 so that they can do all their house chores and schoolwork.* (Phindile)

> *It is positive because we get education on how to take care of these children. Yes, that is the good thing. Yes, you give us wisdom on how to take care of these children. Yes, that is the good thing. We teach each other to love these children.* (Mary)

Children need to be cared for in a way that promotes their ability to thrive and ensure their survival and promotion. Safety needs are important for all children. Children rely on parents and other primary caregivers inside and outside the home to act on their behalf to ensure their safety and healthy development (Institute of Medicine and National Research Council, 2015). Improving the grandmothers' parenting competency is an integral component of the foster care awareness programme. Parenting interventions are structured strategies designed to support and enhance parenting practices, with a central focus on promoting positive child development, and reducing behavioural or emotional problems in children (N'zi et al., 2016).

Sub-theme 2.3: Learning to accept the situation

Some of the grandmothers described how attending the foster care awareness programme and talking to others in the group context had taught them to accept the situation of their own child having died. Participants noted that their children had passed on and now life has become difficult. However, attending the foster care awareness programme makes them realise that the other person has four or five children that have passed away, and therefore they are just like many other people.

> *Going to attend foster care awareness programme assisted me a lot because I used to think about the death of my daughter. Now I have accepted* [it]*, and my foster children also forget about the death of their parents.* (Betty)

> *It took some time but listening to others was therapeutic and the social workers assisted us to go through the different stages of mourning and grief before we joined the group. It was helpful to join the group for more support.* (Elizabeth)

A child's death is one of life's most difficult experiences. Bereaved parents experience more intense grief than adults who experience other losses. Parental grief is profound, regardless of

the number of years since the loss, the age of the child and the cause of death (Boyden et al., 2014). Some of the grandmothers described how attending the foster care awareness programme and talking to others in the group context assisted them to accept the situation of their children who had passed on. They shared how the passing of their children affected them as parents and how life has become so difficult. The findings suggest that the foster care awareness programme assisted the participants to learn to accept their situation about the death of their children.

Theme 3: Grandmothers' description of the challenges they experience with their foster children

Although the researcher did not directly ask the participating grandmothers to explain the challenges they experience with their foster children, some of the grandmothers felt that it was necessary to share their feelings about the challenges they experience with their foster children.

Sub-theme 3.1: Using drugs

Study findings indicated that most of the grandmothers were experiencing challenges with their foster child using drugs. Some grandchildren were under the influence of substance abuse and smoking drugs.

> *My foster child is smoking drugs … I don't want to be embarrassed by her…She was a chubby kid but when she started these things, she even failed Grade 10. In 2019, she showed me who she really is…* (Lucy)

> He [foster child] *walks around with older men with families … These men have wives, some of them even have children … They drink alcohol and smoke weed; do you see how thin he is? It's the weed … it means it's not good for him. Because* [other foster child] *smokes but he doesn't change, it's not good for that one, but he smokes it. There is nothing I can do; I have talked, and I am tired.* (Betty)

Substance abuse is a pattern of harmful use of any substance for mood-altering purposes. It is a very difficult phenomenon to deal with, especially for grandmothers who are old and parenting foster grandchildren. Substance abuse is the harmful or hazardous use of psychotic substance use that can lead to dependency syndrome (World Health Organization, 2012). Adolescent substance abuse is a major public health problem worldwide (Whiteford et al., 2013). Study findings indicate that the participants find it difficult to cope with the reality that their grandchildren are addicted to substances. Grandchildren's substance abuse manifests in changes of behaviour that alters the ways in which the foster grandmothers would have raised them. There is serious evidence of bitterness and resignation in the vignettes of the grandmothers. There is even evidence that they have lost hope in redeeming their grandchildren from these wayward habits.

Sub-theme 3.2: School challenges and lack of understanding or respect

Some grandmothers described how they experience challenges related to schooling and lack of understanding or respect between the grandmother and their foster children. One of the participants stated that her foster child does not want to go to school. He should be at school, but he is difficult, and he fights with other students at school and the authorities expelled him.

> [He] *doesn't want to go to school. He should be in school. He's difficult. He fights with other students at school, and they expelled him. I couldn't see him. He'd bath in the morning, get dressed and go and sit somewhere. Later, when the school is out, he came back, I didn't know anything ... and the next year he would go back to school. He almost dropped out in the middle of the year.* (Mary)

> *The problem I have seen is that they're not studying, they don't have time. When they come back from school, they go to feeding scheme, instead of staying home after feeding scheme, they're gone. I have even stopped them from going to play soccer, soccer does nothing good for you, sit down and study. But it remains the same* (Zandile)

> *In attending foster care awareness programme, I was assisted to accept the loss I experienced with the passing of my daughter. I have healed and my foster children also learnt to accept.* (Phindile)

The findings showed that the schooling challenges and the lack of understanding were observed by the participants as factors that contribute to the foster parents' anxieties as they raise their foster children. The educational challenges of raising foster children are quite consistent from one foster care placement to another. The attitudes towards school manifest in absenteeism and violent behaviours. If they are not expelled, then there is a cycle of unacceptable behaviours in the school. These disruptions in school enrolment have been recognised as the most difficult barrier for foster children (Morton, 2018). The academic performance of the foster children is generally poor when compared to non-foster children. They also demonstrate a lack of concentration and inability to do their schoolwork (Magampa, 2014).

Theme 4: Grandmothers' accounts of the foster care awareness programme and how it helped them and their families

Sub-theme 4.1: How to discipline and talk to the child

Participants explained that what had helped them most in attending the foster care awareness programme was that they had learned how to discipline and talk to the child.

> *Foster care awareness programme worked for me ... because I now know how to discipline my foster child. When it's late, he should know that it's time to go home. Old as I am, as a mother, as a granny, a child who stays outside until 9 pm is no good, it's not good. A child gets the rules here at home, isn't it? He gets the law at home.* (Phindile)

> *They [foster children] don't even show that they don't have parents. I do everything for them, but I used to beat them up. I would beat them up so much using this cable ... I have injured this one already using a cable, she has a scar...During foster care awareness*

programme I learned that we need to communicate politely with our foster children, and we need to teach them how to do things for themselves. (Lerato)

The term discipline refers to a state of orderly conduct of an individual which is gained through training in self-control and in habits of obedience to socially approved standards of thought and action. Discipline is very important in life. In its absence, people cannot utilise their powers properly (Kashyap, 2015). Effective communication requires an understanding between the grandmother-headed families and their foster children to understand and help their foster children to demonstrate kindness. Communication skills training is an effective way to reduce the conflict. The findings of this study indicate that the foster care awareness programme allows the participants to understand their grandchildren much better, especially with the pressures that children have to face in this day and age (Kourkouta & Papathanasiou, 2014).

Sub-theme 4.2: Teaching and loving foster children

The grandmothers expressed that what had been most helpful for them from the foster care awareness programme was that they had learnt what to teach the foster children. The finding is supported in the following sentiments:

We must teach them so that they can do things for themselves in the future. They must be able to bath and wash ... When you show them how life should be lived, that's what helps a lot when we are at foster care awareness programme meeting. Because sometimes you raise a child without teaching him how to do the dishes and washing clothes, you say that you will do it for him. The time God remembers you, that child will be totally lost. Yes, because you must teach him how to live life. And teach him what's right without feeling sorry for him because he doesn't have a mother. (Mary)

I let go of what I used to have and use what you have guided me on parenting skills. I used to feel like these children are giving me a hard time. When I got there, you told me to love them. You told me that the main thing is to love them. Because if you don't love them, they will keep saying our mothers are not there, that is why they are doing this to us ... It's the education you gave to us, it's hard to raise orphans ... It's not child's play when you see someone raising them ... Seriously, raising these children needs someone who has got faith. (Phindile)

The role of grandmothers has been entrenched in gender and socio-cultural practices (Mtshali, 2016). The children are positively influenced by their grandparents in different ways. The grandparents transfer their cultural values and practices to their grandchildren (Ezenweke, 2015). They provide guidance, love and support to their grandchildren. They attend to their grandchildren's educational, financial, physical, health and safety needs (Dolbin-MavNab, 2017). The study showed that grandmothers provided guidance, love and support to their foster children.

Sub-theme 4.3: Need to save money

Numerous grandmothers described that what had helped the most was that they needed to save money for the future of these foster children. The participant stated that they also needed to open bank accounts for their grandchildren and save the money for their grandchildren's tertiary education.

> *I have also learned how to save the money, the situation was difficult, but I forced to save a little bit for them. When you save, it helps in case you're stranded, you wouldn't go to the loan sharks. (*Elizabeth)

> *We also need to open bank account for our grandchildren and save the money for their tertiary education. It has helped me because in December time, I'm able to take the money and go to the shops to buy them clothes.* (Lucy)

Grandmothers stated that saving money helped them the most. When they need money, they are able to use their savings. Some grandmothers also get support from their employers (Phetlhu & Watson, 2014). Having the funds for higher education tuition and fees becomes much easier when one commences saving early (Farrington, 2021). The study findings showed that grandmothers saving money helped them the most: they have plans for the future and they can draw on to their bank accounts in times of dire need.

SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK SERVICES ABOUT GRANDMOTHERS CARING FOR FOSTER CHILDREN

The results of this study may have a significant impact on social workers who work with grandmothers, because they indicate the need for a multifaceted approach (Kgadima, 2024). The findings demonstrate the importance of foster care awareness programmes in empowering grandmothers who are responsible for raising foster children. The results highlight the value of the FCAP in offering grandparents practical skills, parenting advice and emotional support as they manage the difficulties of raising foster children. Grandmothers were able to interact and share their experiences in a secure environment, which allowed them to support one another (Maphosa, 2022). This indicates that there is a need for increased and strengthened peer support networks and group supervision workshops for grandmothers. Social workers should facilitate the creation and strengthening of these networks, organising regular group supervision workshops that encourage open discussion, experience sharing and collective problem-solving. This approach can make grandmothers feel less alone and more supported.

The findings revealed the various challenges that grandmothers experience while raising foster children. This suggests the need to develop and implement more thorough training programmes that concentrate on parenting techniques, effective communication and discipline methods directed to meet the special needs of foster children. Practical methods that address problems such as substance misuse, school-related concerns and controlling challenging behaviours should be a part of these programmes. There would be an improvement to the foster care awareness programme if the children were included, so that they could also have information about what they talk about and share. Such shared experiences could lead to collaboration in resolving the range of challenges.

Despite the challenges that were reported, the findings demonstrated the resilience of grandmothers. This is congruent with the strengths perspective. According to the strength-based approach, through dealing with difficult and problematic life experiences, families develop skills and coping strategies that they can utilise to alleviate a problematic situation (Saleebey, 2013). By focusing on the client's strengths, rather than on the problem, social workers embark on the problem-solving process, which includes the respective phases of engagement, assessment, planning, intervention, evaluation and termination (Kirst-Ashman, 2010). Through the social developmental approach, the findings demonstrated various ways in which social workers actively involve grandmothers in the delivery of the social welfare services. This is in line with one of the themes of the developmental approach (Chavalala, 2016). The theme requires social workers to view the individuals as active participants in their own development rather than as passive recipients of services (Green, 2012; Patel, 2015).

The findings suggest the need to develop and integrate substance abuse intervention programmes specifically for foster children under the care of grandmothers. These programmes should involve the collaboration of social workers with local health services and community organisations to offer counselling, rehabilitation and educational resources. Cultivating financial literacy is also necessary in foster care placements. Therefore, social workers in collaboration with financial institutions should introduce financial literacy programmes that empower grandmothers to manage their finances effectively, save for their grandchildren's future, and make informed financial decisions. These programmes should include practical advice on budgeting, saving for education and avoiding debt.

Social workers should embark on studies that identify NGOs and CBOs that can collaborate with them to offer comprehensive socioeconomic help. These partnerships may lead to revenue-generating ventures and other services that uplift grandmothers' spirits and strengthen their ability to care for their foster children. The study's findings point to the need for the DSD to evaluate the current foster awareness programme for potential adaptation and expansion to other informal settlements. Social workers should advocate for research in various geographical areas to identify best practices and develop guidelines for a responsive and socially dynamic intervention, ensuring that foster care programmes are effective and accessible in different communities.

CONCLUSION

The research for this article utilised both a strengths-based approach and a social development approach to examine the experiences of grandmothers providing foster care for their grandchildren and families. Grandmothers benefit significantly from the peer support and knowledge-sharing opportunities these programmes offer, which help them manage stress, accept their circumstances and improve their caregiving abilities. The positive impacts of the programme include improved emotional wellbeing, better communication with foster children, and enhanced ability to discipline and nurture children more effectively. However, challenges such as substance abuse amongst foster children, educational difficulties and the financial burden on grandmothers remain significant concerns. Addressing these issues requires a multifaceted approach that includes targeted interventions, ongoing support and resources to strengthen the capacity of grandmothers to care for their foster children effectively. In

conclusion, the implications for social work practice call for a holistic, collaborative and dynamic approach to supporting grandmothers who are caregivers. By addressing these needs, social workers can play a crucial role in improving the wellbeing of both grandmothers and the foster children under their care.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Mulalo Abigail Musetsho was a Master's student at the Department of Social Work, University of South Africa. Her field of specialisation includes childcare and protection, involving investigation, conducting home visits, and complying with children processes and procedures. The article resulted from her Master's dissertation, conducted from January 2021 to December 2023, and she wrote the initial draft of the article.

Mimie Sesoko was a supervisor to the student. She supervised the study from January 2021 to December 2023, and she assisted with the writing of the draft article.

Goitseone Leburu is a senior lecturer at the Department of Social Work, University of South Africa. Her field of specialisation includes gender-based violence, intimate partner violence and women empowerment. She assisted with the writing of the draft article and final editing.