

OPERATIONALISING CLUSTER FOSTER CARE SCHEMES AS AN ALTERNATIVE FORM OF CARE

Willem du Toit, Marichen van der Westhuizen, Nicky Alpaslan

Although South African policy and legislation make provision for cluster foster care schemes (CFCSs) as a form of alternative care that provides children with care within a family context, clear guidelines regarding their operationalisation are lacking. This study explores the elements necessary to operationalise CFCSs. The discussion is based on a qualitative research study among managers of existing CFCSs. Findings provide an insight into the nature of CFCSs, management practices, the utilisation of different network structures in the community and support to and from the community.

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INTRODUCTION

The high demand to find care options for South African children in need of care and protection is highlighted by a report by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2014), asserting that many families in South Africa are struggling to care for their children due to "high levels of poverty, domestic violence, substance abuse, sexual abuse and neglect". Yearly, an estimated 50 000 children are victims of crime and there are an estimated 3.7 million orphans in South Africa (UNICEF, 2014).

Cluster foster care schemes (CFCSs) are legally acknowledged as a form of alternative care for children in need of care and protection in South Africa. They are discussed in Chapter 12 of the Children's Amendment Act 41 of 2007 under the heading "Foster Care" and defined as "the reception of children into a cluster foster care scheme registered by a provincial department of social development" (Republic of South Africa, 2008:74). These schemes provide social workers with an alternative care option through which the high demand for care can be managed. However, the operationalisation of this care option is still a grey area (Taback & Associates, 2010). Gallinetti and Sloth-Nielsen (2010) concur in this regard when stating that although the mentioned definition describes the internal nature of CFCSs, it does not clearly describe the content and framework of what such schemes entail. This article is based on a research study, exploring and describing the functioning of existing CFCSs to identify operational elements with the aim of providing practical guidelines for operationalising such schemes in the future. Firstly the background will be provided, based on existing literature, after which the research methodology will be described. The findings will be presented together with a literature control, followed by a conclusion and some recommendations for guidelines to operationalise CFCSs.

BACKGROUND

Children make up 37.3% of the South African population. Alarmingly, 7 million out of 18.6 million children live in the poorest 20% of households (South African Human Rights Commission/UNICEF, 2011). The exact number of children in need of care and protection is difficult to estimate as not all these children are reported to the Department of Social Development. However, statistics regarding foster care grants do provide a picture of the extent of the needs of children. In 2008 455 199 children were reported to be within a foster care placement. This escalated to a total of 512 055 children in 2014 (Children's Institute, 2015).

Although the Constitution of South Africa (Republic of South Africa, 1996), the White Paper on Social Welfare (1997a), the International Convention Regarding the Rights of Children (United Nations, 1997), Section 7 of the Children's Act (Republic of South

Africa, 2006) and the White Paper on Families in South Africa (Department of Social Development, 2013) assert that the family is the basic unit for the care and protection of children, these legislative and policy documents acknowledge the fact that several circumstances within a family and community can contribute to the fact that children in need of care and protection could be dependent on alternative care other than that of the family (Matthias & Zaal, 2009; Republic of South Africa, 2006).

Since 1652 South Africa for the most part, followed European policy regarding the care of families and children in need (Gray & Mackintosh, 1998). Traditionally, the church took care of orphans and children in need of care (Pieterse, 1975). In 1948 the National Party came into power and the “apartheid” system was introduced and continued to dominate South African policy and legislation for the next 48 years. The emphasis in social services was on race, which benefited the white population, while the other population groups did not share in the advantages provided through these social services (Dutschke, 2006).

Discrepancies in the nature of care in institutions and foster care based on race were common, especially the way in which the state gave financial support (Patel, 2005). In reaction to this, several indigenous practices for the care of orphans and children in need of care developed. In the development of indigenous child care practices, the care for these children by extended families, and grandmothers in particular, is highlighted in the literature (Alpaslan & Mabutho, 2005; Gerrand & Ross, 2009; Van Dyk, 2008). In addition, communities also started their own initiatives, such as CFCs to ensure the wellbeing of vulnerable children (South African Human Rights Commission/UNICEF, 2011; Taback & Associates. 2010). As such, CFCs originated spontaneously to care for children in need of care and protection *within* the communities *by* community members (Russel & Schneider, 2008). Indigenous practices were acknowledged and included in legislation and policy documents after the “apartheid” era. The Framework for Social Welfare Services (Department of Social Development, 2013) specifically refers to the fact that social welfare services seek to enhance the social functioning, general wellbeing and the quality of life of service beneficiaries (in this case children in need of care and protection).

The term “alternative care” implies a placement of care where a child is placed in foster care, a child and youth care centre or in temporary safe care by court order for a period determined by the court where the family is not available or not in a position to care for the child (Sloth-Nielsen, 2008). Chapter 12 of the Children’s Amendment Act 38 of 2007 (Republic of South Africa, 2008) makes provision for foster care with a foster parent who is found to be fit, and who was properly assessed by a designated social worker employed by a registered child protection organisation. In practice, there is also a distinction between kinship foster care, where a child is placed with a family member directly related to the child and public foster care, where the state pays recruited and screened foster parents to care for children in need of care and protection (Owusu-Bempah, 2010).

The provision of CFCSs is a new form of legally acknowledged foster care which became part of legislation when the Children's Act (Republic of South Africa, 2006) and the Children's Amendment Act (Republic of South Africa, 2008; Section 156) were first proclaimed. This inclusion of CFCSs, as a form of alternative care, was already shaped in the recommendations for care of children in need of care and protection, as described in the White Paper for Social Welfare (1997a), which reads as follows: "Traditional and indigenous systems of foster care will be recognised provided that the needs and rights of children are protected".

Social work services in South Africa are directed by the developmental social welfare approach, which is aimed at the implementation of "strategies geared towards the development of human potential, the development of capacity and the empowerment of communities", including social justice, and rights-based and empowerment principles (Department of Social Development, 2013). Emphasis is placed on both the social and economic development of people. In terms of economic development, the Framework for Social Welfare Services (Department of Social Development, 2013) highlights the fact that "programmes and strategies can be introduced to integrate people through ... community-based projects that encourage economic self-sufficiency and full integration into society".

For this reason, the research study described in this article was conducted from a social developmental approach, characterised as a process of planned social change, aimed at the community as a whole, but specifically and mainly focusing on previously disadvantaged groups and emphasising the utilisation of local skills and indigenous practices. Social development is closely connected to sustainability of services and economic development (Patel, 2005). The inclusion of CFCSs as an acknowledgement of a form of care, as well as clear guidelines to ensure effective functioning of such schemes, is guided by these characteristics of the social developmental approach. Taback and Associates (2010), however, recommend, among other things, that clear guidelines should be developed to ensure the effective functioning of CFCSs.

Problem statement

Legislation (Republic of South Africa, 2006, 2008, 2010) regarding CFCSs as a form of alternative care is in place. Although there are certain guidelines regarding the definition, registration and minimum standards for this type of alternative care, there are no standardised guidelines to assist service providers to operationalise such schemes. Therefore, a need was identified to explore the functional elements in existing CFCSs. The **research question** emanating from the research problem was: What are the operational elements necessary for the operationalisation of CFCSs? In order to answer the research question the **research goal**, the purpose of the study, was to explore and describe the present functioning of CFCSs in order to identify operational elements necessary for the operationalisation of CFCSs. The research methodology utilised to answer the research question will be discussed next.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to explore and describe the present functioning of CFCSs, it was deemed necessary to obtain data from the people who are functioning “within” the research problem (Creswell, 2009). The qualitative research approach was chosen to provide a framework from which the experiences and perspectives of the “insiders” could be explored and described. The contextual research design was used to explore and describe the research problem within the context in which the participants functioned in (i.e. a CFCS in the South African context) and to guide the choices related to the population and sampling method and techniques (Babbie & Mouton, 2009). In addition, the explorative research design served as a guide to encourage participants to participate in the collection of the data by means of “telling their stories” and to assist with choices of population and sampling, as well as the method of data collection (Babbie, 2007). The descriptive research design was chosen to be used together with the explorative research design to inform the choices regarding methods of data collection and data analysis (Rubin & Babbie, 2005).

The population from which the data were obtained was identified as all managers of existing CFCSs. The non-probability sampling method, together with the purposive and snowball sampling techniques were employed (Gravetter & Forzano, 2009). The criteria for inclusion in the sample were determined as all managers of CFCSs who functioned through a management committee or management board; who managed two or more cluster foster homes; and who applied or plan to apply for registration as a CFCS. In this study data saturation was detected after seven interviews. The data collection was terminated after nine interviews.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the method of data collection. This method served as a framework from which specific information related to the research goal could be obtained, while allowing new ideas to be conveyed during the interviews (Marlow, 2011). Tesch’s eight steps for the analysis of qualitative data, as described in Creswell (2009), were chosen to serve as a guideline according to which data were coded and categorised in themes and sub-themes. Authenticity of the data was ensured by means of the research designs, the participants (sampling procedure), interviewing techniques, the use of an independent coder and the context in which the study took place. Transformability and dependability were ensured by means of a thick description of the methodology employed, the purposive sampling technique, triangulation of sources of data and methods of data collection. The issue of conformability was dealt with through the use of field notes, transcripts and an independent coder (Schurink, Fouché & De Vos, 2011:429).

Ethical practice focused on the following: voluntary participation, informed consent by participants, confidentiality and anonymity of the participants, objectivity, careful implementation of the research designs and accurate reporting of findings (Miley, O’Melia & DuBois, 2009).

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Demographic profile of participants

Women played a leading role in the starting of CFCSs in South Africa (Russell & Schneider, 2008). In line with this, seven of the nine participating CFCSs were female while two were male. The age groups of the participants ranged from one participant in the age group 21 to 30 years, one in the age group 31 to 40 years, one in the age group 41 to 50 years, and four participants in the age group 51 to 60 years. Seven participants were white, while two were coloured. None of the participants represented African or Asian racial groups. The participants represented different language groups and six of the participants were English speaking, while three of the participants were Afrikaans speaking. Six of the managers of the CFCSs that participated in the study were situated in urban areas, while three participating managers managed CFCSs in a rural area. The Children's Institute (2015), however, reports that "nearly half of South Africa's children (45%) lived in rural households in 2012 – equivalent to 8.4 million children". The field of expertise of the participating managers varied from tertiary training in social work, legal, education and marketing practices to career experiences in child care practices. The current positions that the participants held in the various CFCSs ranged from strategic managers, operational managers to social workers.

The findings resulted in the following six themes.

Theme 1: Motivation for starting a CFCS

All of the participants started with this form of alternative care before it was included in the Children's Act, as amended (Republic of South Africa, 2008), as illustrated by the following statement:

"At that stage we did not know what cluster foster care was, but it turned out to be what we are doing. We just did not have a name for what we were doing."

The basic right of a child to be part of a family was provided as one reason for starting a CFCS. A participant explained: *"It is an inherent part of childhood to be part of a family and to be accepted as part of the family."* Different perceptions exist about what family means. Owusu-Bempah (2010) argues that there are different perceptions of "a family" or "a parent" between Western societies and more traditional societies. Western societies hold the opinion that a child should be raised by members of a family who are biologically related to him/her. Traditional societies hold the opinion that a child belongs to a community and as such is the child of all the members in that community (Schmidt, 2007). Furthermore, the term "family" within the South African context no longer only refers to parents, but can also include child-headed households, grandparents' households, single parents and same-sex parents (UNICEF, 2014).

The participants referred to religious/spiritual motivations and altruistic reasons as another reason to start a CFCS (cf. Owusu-Bempah, 2010).

"We realised that we could provide a family unit and serve as God's hands."

"We were more driven by our hearts, rather to look at our finances."

Some of the participants in this study started with CFCSs to deal with the increasing need for alternative care for children who live with HIV. *“When we [two co-workers who were previously employed by a children’s home] were looking after very sick HIV-positive children and the anti-retroviral drugs came in and the children were living – they were not dying, [we realised] there will be a future for the children.”* This step was motivated by the fact that the children with HIV had longer life expectations with anti-retroviral treatment (Rochat, Mitchell & Richter, 2008).

Participants also shared their motivation to integrate children into a community as close as possible to their culture of origin. *“We started a community project for the children and from that we realised that, when children cannot stay in their communities due to various problems, they were shipped out to other communities and then we started with the two houses in K that you visit today – in order to place children back in their communities.”* Both the Children’s Amendment Act 41 of 2007 (Republic of South Africa, 2008) and the White Paper on Families (2012) emphasise the fact that children in need of care and protection should, as far as possible, be cared for in their environments of origin.

Another motivation was to join forces with other foster parents in order to share resources and to obtain support.

We also started by sharing resources – like food, clothing, skills, doctors, professionals.”

“Yes some of us had resources and other did not have. I had resources available to me that other mothers and other houses could use.”

Social support includes exchanges in social networks that provide emotional encouragement, concrete assistance or tangible aid and advice and information (Miley *et al.*, 2009). In this study, participants shared experiences that can be linked to all the above.

One of the participants in this study mentioned that she was approached by prospective foster parents who wanted to start a CFCS, but did not have the financial means to start such a project. *“Initially it was mothers who wanted to look after children, but they did not have the facilities to do that. So for us it was putting the homes together and assisting them to look after the kids.”*

Theme 2: Descriptions of the children who are being cared for in the various CFCSs

As one of the alternative care options stipulated in the Children’s Act 38 of 2005, CFCSs make provision for children who were found in need of care and protection by the court (Matthias, 2010). The participants reported that all vulnerable children between 0 and 18 years qualify for admission. However, they reported that admission of children with specific behavioural problems is carefully considered. *“It does not mean we cannot take children with problematic behaviour, but you need to minimise the risk to the other children”*. The consultation with the foster parent before placements were made, according to the participants, also focused on determining whether the foster

parents have the potential to meet the individual needs of the child concerned, as well as the influence that a new admission will have on the children already in the foster care of the potential foster parent. *“The suitability of the foster mother, to respond to individual needs of the child determines if we can accommodate the child.”*

The participants elaborated further and reported that they attempt to do the placements in such a way that a family structure is provided and developed. *“We also try to get a family dynamic going there. Because the older children help with younger children and younger children learn from the older children.”* They specifically highlighted the importance of the legal placement of children: *“If the child has no legal court order, somebody can come and take the child without consent from our care.”* However, they also indicated that some of the children in their care initially had court orders, but that those orders lapsed and were not extended. *“Twenty-five percent of our children are not on a proper court order. I mean, we had the orders, but it lapsed and we do not have any extension of the order.”*

A description was provided on how focus is placed on the integration of the children into their cultural communities. *“The children are meant to be growing up like other children in the community.”* The participants described the consequences if children are alienated from their communities of origin as follows: *“They cannot communicate in the mother tongue and the child cannot associate with the experiences of the family. I think this is why this set-up is so important, because the child lives in his culture, understands his culture and lives in a community that he can associate with.”* The increasing phenomenon of children in need of care and protection implies that not all children will have the opportunity to be raised in their culture of origin. Foster parents who are from different cultural backgrounds than that of the foster child have to accept the responsibility of allowing the child to have access to his/her own cultural background (Iowa Foster and Adoptive Parents Association, 2008).

Another aspect related to the aim of providing the children in CFCSs with a family structure within their communities of origin also includes attempts to reunite the children with their own families. The participants acknowledged the potential temporary nature of foster care placements. *“Many children can go home and do not need to stay long-term with us.”*

Theme 3: The nature of CFCSs

The participants manage between three and four homes in a specific area. Each home has a foster parent who fosters a maximum of six children. *“We have homes set up in the communities. Each home has six children. I think our focus is to keep children together and keeping children in the communities where they came from.”* The participants described the nature of CFCSs as the management of and support for a group of foster care parents, the development of a management system for existing foster care parents, and management of homes within the community instead of the traditional children’s home model.

“We are doing it as a group of foster mothers in a particular area, looking after children and the management of supervising and supporting it.”

“We provide management to foster parents who already look after foster children.”

“They [the foster parents within the CFCS] have to be in the community and not bunched together as an organisation with 6 cottages on a piece of land.”

The interaction between the different houses within a CFCS was described as follows: *“our set-up provides the foster parents with guidance so that the children in the different homes are being cared for based on the same principles. The different homes all form part of a big family with family values.”* In line with the descriptions above, Taback and Associates (2010) refer to different models of CFCSs. Typical characteristics related to the participants’ descriptions are that these schemes are managed by non-government organisations (NGOs) and consist of more than two community foster homes where the foster parents and six foster children live in the home of the foster parents.

Theme 4: Current management practices of a CFCS

The two key pieces of legislation, namely the Children’s Amendment Act 41 of 2007 (Republic of South Africa, 2008:74) and the Non-profit Organisation Act 71 of 1997 (Republic of South Africa, 1997b:8), both require that management practices must be clearly defined and monitored. The participating managers of CFCSs differentiated between two levels of management, namely strategic management and operational management. In this theme the following five sub-themes were identified.

Sub-theme 4.1: Current strategic management practices

Strategic management is a process whereby all the organisational functions and resources are integrated and coordinated in order to achieve the long-term objectives of the organisation (Du Toit, Erasmus & Strydom, 2010).

The participants highlighted the following regarding the legal requirements to which CFCSs have to adhere:

“The organisation must have a name and must register as a Non-Profit Organisation [NPO]. We must also have a management board and we are also registered at SARS [South African Receiver of Revenue].”

“You must be a registered NPO trust, a trust, PBO [public benefit organisation] or a registered child care organisation.”

Registration as a child protection organisation in terms of section 107 of the Children’s Amendment Act (Republic of South Africa, 2008) is not one of the requirements to register as a CFCS. However, a key requirement is to register as an NPO (Republic of South Africa, 2008). The Non-profit Organisation Act defines an NPO as “a trust, company or other association of persons that are (a) established for public purpose and (b) the income and property of which are not distributable to its members or office-bearers except as reasonable compensation for services rendered” (Republic of South Africa, 1997b). A PBO is an organisation established in the Republic of South Africa

that must be constituted in one of the following ways: incorporated under section 21 of the Companies Act 71 of 2008; a trust; a voluntary association; or a branch of a foreign charitable organisation (South African Revenue Services, 2007).

The management boards of the participating CFCSs were constituted as a community committee or a trust:

“Our management functions as committee made up from community members.”

“We formed a board of trustees. We are a legally constituted trust. So J and I [the two co-managers] are the managing trustees, and we are employed by the trustees and responsible for the operation of the organisation.”

The changing environment in which an NPO operates makes it difficult to be specific about the skills and knowledge needed on the management board of an organisation at a specific time. Therefore skills and knowledge need to be recruited as the need arises (Davis, Cassim, Geach, Mongalo, Butler, Loubser, Coetzee & Burdette, 2011). In this study the participants identified a passion (i.e. vision) and management skills (i.e. human resource management, finances and administration) as skills that they valued in the chairperson of the management board:

“Our chairperson was chosen because he is motivated to become involved in caring for children.”

“The chairperson is a farm owner and he has specific management skills. He is valuable because he can manage financial and administrative aspects of our organisation.”

“We have a retired chartered accountant on our management to develop administrative and financial systems.”

“We have someone who is skilled to do the VAT [Value Added Tax] and all our financial stuff.”

“N [name of board member] who does our sponsorship has experience in fundraising.”

“We have a legal person on the board that does all our legal stuff.”

“There is person who does our human resources and he is a businessman.”

The participants reported that the foster parents in the CFCSs may not serve on the management board: *“They cannot, because they are also employees of the organisations”* (Republic of South Africa, 1997b; Section 12 (2) (c); Gallinetti & Sloth-Nielsen, 2010).

The involvement and visibility of the strategic management team are important, firstly, to provide the strategic direction to the organisation and, secondly, to understand the different phases through which the strategic processes are moving (Ehlers & Lazenby, 2007). The participants reflected on the fact that trustees on management boards must serve voluntarily based on a willingness to be actively involved.

“When you are a trustee you need to take legal and financial responsibility.”

“All our board members are really involved in the running of the organisation.”

The participants described the financial management of CFCs as follows: *“It is a constant management responsibility.”* Some challenges were highlighted: *“Running cost is more easily, because people like to provide for the care of children. Human resources, salaries, and administrative costs are more difficult to find money for.”* Financial management of an NPO includes the acquisition, utilisation and control of money. One of key elements is to ensure that the organisation’s spending remains within the allocated budget (Keulder & Benz, 2011).

According to the participants, funding is mainly collected through three forms of resources, namely donations, fundraising structures and foster care grants. Some of the participants viewed donations as their most important source of income, while others viewed donations as an additional income:

“We have a very broad base of funders. We have individuals, companies, trusts and foundations.”

“Our biggest funder contributes about 10% of our funding each year. We have about 60 local and abroad funders. Even if one of our biggest funders withdraw we can say it is 10% of our budget, we can make a plan.”

The participating managers reported that many donors target children in need of care and protection as part of their social responsibility. This often happens in the form of special programmes, outings and treats for children. They were, however, of the opinion that in order to simulate a real family situation, they need to control these efforts. *“We have a volunteer over December who wants to take them to the beach every day. Not all of the community children go to the beach everyday – it must be a special treat, not a right.”*

Similarly, some of the participants believed in organised fundraising events, while others believed such events are time-consuming and less effective.

“That is part of the resources that we have here at the office. We have a fundraiser and we have a strategic plan for the year.”

“We do not, for instance, do events, because events are time-consuming. We rather do funding proposals and focus on the business sector’s social responsibilities policies.”

Price (2008) and Jablonski (2011) are of the opinion that fundraising strategies must be cost effective and in line with the strategic objectives of the organisation. Organisations are faced with the challenge to develop fundraising strategies that will not only reflect their core business, but also speak to potential funders (Mostashari, 2005). A participant reported on how potential funders are made aware of the needs of the organisation: *“We get the community members who want to do Christmas parties. We ask them instead of parties to give us, for instance, money to pay salaries of necessary staff or to buy specific items that the children need.”*

Some participating managers reported that some of the foster parents received foster care grants, while others combine their grants.

“The foster mother gets the foster grant.”

“They [referring to foster mothers] will receive that money in their own bank account and we have an agreement to pool that money so that we can jointly draw the resources from that money.”

“They receive petty cash monthly. Some goes for bread and milk. And she gives pocket money out of that for the kids. If she overspends, she has to explain why or she has to get permission to overspend.”

Section 8 of the Social Assistance Act 13 of 2004 (Republic of South Africa, 2004) stipulates that a foster parent is eligible for a foster care grant. The participating managers, however, reported that applications for grants are challenging: *“Most of the time they want documents that is not available. They want, for instance, both the parents’ death certificates. Half the time we do not know who the fathers are. We also have the same problem with extensions of court orders by the Children’s Court.”*

According to the participants, the procurement of food and clothing is mostly done by the operational managers of the CFCSs (see sub-theme 4.2 below). *“We network with companies like W [name of company], who will have waste. They can’t sell it but you have still four, five days that you can use that food.”*

Sub-theme 4.2: The operational management team involved in the day-to-day tasks

In a CFCS the operational management will imply that the operational management team is responsible for ensuring the effective care of the children in that CFCS. The responsibilities include the provision of support, mentoring, supervision and advice to member foster parents (Republic of South Africa, 2010). The participating managers of the CFCSs viewed their roles and responsibilities within the operational management team as follows:

“And what we both [referring to self and co-manager] do is the development of new houses through the different stages: building, finding funds meeting with churches.”

“I see my role as a manager as more of a supportive role instead of a manager [who] comes down hard on the people.”

Support to co-workers can be provided on two levels, namely, (1) the provision of material and goods; and (2) the provision of on-going emotional support (Iravani, 2011). According to Kohler Durand (2007), the elements of support to foster parents include financial, practical, emotional, psychological and social support as well as professional development, problem-solving, respite and community support. In this study the participants reflected on the day-to-day management of the foster houses.

“We see to the day-to-day running of the foster houses and whatever administrative requirements there are. What are the requirements of the house and what are the mother’s individual needs?”

“Regarding food and clothing, we have a pool that is available to every foster mother.”

In terms of the professional development of the foster parents, the following statement was shared: *“I find out what kind of training do they need and I then arrange it.”*

In order to ensure effective co-operation and communication in the CFCSs, the participating managers made use of meetings: *“They come every Friday at the offices where we generally will discuss what the issues are, what the problems are, and what the challenges with the kids are.”*

Specific administrative structures were developed to assist the foster parents with the day-to-day running of their homes, as well as to hold them accountable to render effective foster care services to the children in their foster care. *“We have our own administrative structures where everybody has a register at their houses that needs to be signed. We have all the legal policies at the houses that need to be signed. Every house mother has petty cash where she pays the cost – she has to sign where the money goes.”*

Sub-theme 4.3: The role of the social worker in a CFCS

A CFCS must employ at least one person registered as a social worker with the Council for Social Service Professionals for every 50 children served by the specific CFCS (Republic of South Africa, 2010). Alternatively, the CFCS can enter into a formal agreement with a designated child protection organisation. Some of the participants indicated that they relied on external social workers; others employed a social worker; and others planned to either employ a full-time social worker or obtain the services of a consultant social worker.

“I am blessed to have an employed social worker around.”

“At the moment we work toward employing either a social worker or a social work consultant.”

“We have to rely on the external social workers to get the legal side done.”

The participants explained that the social workers at child protection organisations are responsible for the statutory control of children who are in foster care with the foster parents in CFCSs. *“The Children’s Act says that the foster child is placed under the supervision of a social worker and that this supervision means the social worker needs to assist the child and support the foster family.”*

Schofield and Ward (2008) are of the opinion that social workers need to be involved from the placement of children in foster care right up to such time as the foster child may leave his/her foster care placement. The participants were of the opinion that the social workers play a vital role in establishing and monitoring contact between the child in the CFCS and his/her biological family. *“Part of the social worker’s role will be to establish a visiting contract with the family.”*

Another role of the social worker, as identified by the participants, was that they are also involved in the recruiting, selecting and screening of foster parents.

“We are not registered as a child protection organisation and cannot become involved in the screening of foster parents. We need an external social worker for that.”

“As a child protection organisation we have the right to do the screening.”

Social workers at CFCSs also aim to deal with specific developmental needs of the foster children in their care. *“The social worker will come in and address the needs. Like now she started a group for our teenagers to develop life skills.”*

Sub-theme 4.4: The foster parents providing foster care in a CFCS

Some of the participating managers of CFCSs viewed the foster parents as house mothers (Colby-Newton, 2006): *“We see her as the house mother in the organisation.”* Another term that has been used by Russell and Schneider (2008) is that of a “surrogate mother”, meaning a person who is hired to care for six orphans in the community. Additionally, the participants highlighted the legal status of the foster parents in their CFCSs: *“We have the foster moms as the legal guardian of the children”* (Republic of South Africa, 2008). The participating managers explained that, due to the legal aspects, recruitment of suitable foster parents within a CFCS setting can be a sensitive process. *“We had a family interested, but as soon as they found that they have to sign the children on their own names they were scared.”*

Another limitation was identified as the recruitment of foster parents for children with special needs.

“You try to create normal family circumstances and normally, with younger children, to suddenly put in a very troubled 13 year old is very disruptive to the family.”

“Also the suitability of the foster mother – it is no use placing a child with a mother that could not understand the child.”

Beek and Schofield (2004) identified children with behavioural and learning disabilities, as well as children with severe disabilities, as groups of children who are extremely vulnerable in foster care and who also put strain on the foster parents. The inability of foster parents to deal with the special needs of these children often contributes to the breakdown of the foster placement and/or the difficulty to find suitable foster parents for such children.

One of the important tasks of the participating managers in this study was the recruitment of suitable foster parents. The participants explained that a proper screening process is completed before the foster parent is employed. *“The person must first be screened and approved to act as a foster parent. Only after that we consider employment”* (Republic of South Africa, 2006). In terms of the screening and what to look for they stated:

“We are extra cautious about the screening, because we do not want to expose the children to another form of removal when the foster mother is found not to be suitable after a while.”

“We look at things such as age; they must be above 45 years of age, must not have any dependent children, must have prior knowledge of working with children or looked after in a family setting.”

“We also try to look at the background of the mom; that it is similar to the children that she is going to care for.”

The manager at the specific scheme will, after screening a potential foster parent, also include the community. The aim is to obtain their input into the suitability of the person to provide foster care to children in need of care and protection. The participants held the following opinions on this aspect:

“And then when we partner with communities and churches in the community, they also need to approve of the person.”

“We also need our partners for their external knowledge. They know if it is a woman of high moral standing or if she will beat the kids.”

The final screening of CFCSs’ foster parents is done by an external social worker, employed by a registered child protection organisation. *“We can do that [referring to the final screening], but we get an outside social worker from Child Welfare or Social Services.”*

Although foster parents might have suitable knowledge, skills and personal attitudes, the participants also highlighted that they provide provided foster parents with training. Roux, Bangana and Strydom (2010) suggest that foster parents should be empowered to deal with the physical, emotional, social and educational needs of children in their foster care. The training of the foster parents in the participating CFCSs was described as follows: *“She must stay with another foster parent for a week to see what they do and if she is able to care for the children. Then she is introduced to the children to start building a relationship.”*

According to participants in this study, the on-going training programme involves the following: *“With our training for the foster moms we will address, for instance, the special needs of the children and discipline of our children.”*

The participants reported that foster parents are employed by the CFCS and should therefore be treated as employees who have certain rights and responsibilities. *“I think what we as management need to know is that the foster moms are staff and that they are protected by the basic conditions of employment.”* An employment condition that was highlighted by the participants is the initial contract or probation period (Keulder & Benz, 2011). *“Initially it is for a trial period of three months, but then they go on a permanent contract.”* However, the following statements indicate that there were elements of risk in the initial three months’ probation contract:

“It is also complicated, because the children get attached to the person.”

“There is also the legal implication, because the children are placed by the court in the care of the person. So if the person is not suitable, it means that that placement needs to be reversed.”

The participating managers of CFCSs regarded the roles and responsibilities of foster parents as follows: *“Each mother is responsible for the daily care of the children in their care.”* Besides the care component, foster parents also need to deal with a number of diverse needs of children in their care. In terms of dealing with specific challenges in terms of foster children, one of the unique characteristics of CFCSs is the presence of the support element amongst members of the particular CFCS. The following statements offered by the participants to this study attest to this:

“If one mother needs to go to the hospital, she can ask another foster mother in the scheme to look after the children. We make sure that we have two houses close to one another so that they can support one another.”

“They share resources and stand in for one another. The foster mother is off every second weekend, but never at the same time. They stand in for one another.”

The participants referred to assistants who provide support to the foster care parents in the CFCS, and who meet the specific emotional and developmental needs of the children along the following lines:

“In case where a foster mother dies or retires, you have the assistant who the child knows and who is in the house.”

“I think the assistant plays an instrumental part in our children’s lives. Not only do they assist the mother. I feel that they have an important role in the development of the child, because they are younger than the foster mother. She can help the child with homework and with skills and also life skills.”

Sub-theme 4.5: The role of volunteers in the day-to-day activities of a CFCS

Volunteers have been playing a vital role in the operations of a number of welfare organisations for many years (Weinbach, 2010). It appears, from the participants’ statements, that most of the more specialised services are provided by volunteers:

“We make use of volunteers such as educators and social workers.”

“We use a volunteer as behaviour practitioner; we have a psychologist, educational psychologist, doctors, so any skills we need. Occupational therapists we try to get from the community which is our resource pool.”

Theme 5: The relationship between CFCSs and different network structures in the community

Social networks refer to the different structures in a community that provide support to the individual or the organisation (Miley *et al.*, 2009). In this study the participating managers reported, on the one hand, that social workers employed by child protection agencies played an important role in their network structure. *“We have to rely on the external social workers to get therapeutic work done.”* As mentioned earlier, one of the

primary areas of support that CFCSs receive from social workers at child protection organisations is assistance with the screening of potential foster parents. *“They act as a back-up and safety-net for us with the screening.”* On the other hand, they indicated that this aspect is not always experienced as positive. *“I have been here for three years and I had a social worker here once.”*

In terms of the monitoring of foster care placements, the participants reported that social workers’ input is needed: *“I believe they can render a more effective supervision services. It is not just putting a plate of food on the table. The child needs to be loved.”*

The participants valued sound network structures with educational and medical service providers in order to meet the needs of the foster children in their care.

“We use schools in our areas which are within walking distance from our homes. The children do not use public transport or go to schools in other areas.”

We have a good relationship with the day hospital that helps a lot with the care of our HIV and disabled children.”

Theme 6: Support to and from the community in which the CFCS is situated

Besides formal social work, health and educational support structures, the participating CFCSs also enjoyed support from their local communities. The participants viewed the fact that they are community-based as an important characteristic of CFCSs (Gallinetti & Sloth-Nielsen, 2010). They referred to this as follows:

“H [the name of the CFCS] does not start a community, but forms part of an already existing community.”

“Our project became part of a community and our children are not seen as foster children or labelled.”

Some participants reported that community committees formed part of how they managed their CFCSs (also see sub-theme 4.1).

“They are a set of people living in the community that comes around and find out how we are. Some of them also stay with the children if the foster mother needs to go with one of the children to the hospital.”

“But each house has its own committee and then they are represented from the community, the foster mother and the church.”

Community committees are community-based structures focusing on the needs of the residents of that community and ensuring that their needs are addressed (Martin, 2010). Ofuoka (2009) concurs that a community committee’s purpose is also to co-ordinate the self-help development of a community. The participants in this study described the focus areas of the community committees as follows:

“Day-to-day support, you know today one of the children has to go to a sexual abuse clinic and one of the community members drove her there and supported her through the process.”

“Keeping an eye on the finances of the children, so that the foster mom spends her money properly.”

“Some houses are financially supported by their committees. Some committees do fundraising to support their houses.”

According to the participating managers of CFCSs, the schemes also provided specific support and services to the communities in which they were situated.

“We started a crèche for our own children who went to school, and then a Gogo who is deaf and looking after her seven-year old granddaughter came here and asked for assistance with homework for the child and that is how it started.”

“In the morning the one [referring to one of the assistants] will give computer training to members of the community.”

“If you were here at 15:00 you will see how our houses become a community haven for all children of the community.”

CONCLUSION

The conclusions below provide a summary of elements to be included in the operationalising of CFCSs, as identified by the participants.

The motivation to develop CFCSs, and also their potential value, included the child’s right to be part of a community and a family, providing community-based care for children with HIV and AIDS, giving children the opportunity to be cared for within their culture of origin, and providing support, based on previous experience in the field of providing alternative care, to foster parents in CFCSs.

The participating CFCSs had between three and four foster homes with each consisting of a foster parent(s) with six foster children in their care. Unique characteristics of CFCSs are that they fall within the ambit of community-based foster care and that members share resources and support one another. The findings highlight a reciprocal benefit for both the CFCSs and the community.

Children are admitted to CFCSs when they are found to be in need of care and protection by the children’s court. In addition, CFCSs have certain admission criteria that are unique to the specific CFCS, including the age group of the child, behavioural management needs of the child and special needs.

The participants viewed the reintegration of the children in their care into the community, as well as the reunification with their biological family and/or extended family, as an important goal of CFCSs.

The participating CFCSs are managed by a strategic management board and by an operational management team. The strategic management structure is responsible for providing strategic direction, while the operational management team is responsible for the implementation of the strategic decisions and objectives of the CFCS.

The strategic management boards of the participating CFCSs consisted of volunteers from the community, chosen for their specific skills and the contribution they can make.

Skills needed on the board include planning, marketing, and financial, project and human resource management skills. The strategic management boards are also responsible for the procurement of food, clothing and other basic essentials as well as for providing the infrastructure, such as housing and basic services, to the foster parents who are active members of the CFCS.

The operational management team is responsible for the day-to-day management of the different foster homes. This includes the provision of support, mentoring, supervision and advice to active members of the CFCS.

Finances are obtained through fundraising efforts, donations (cash or in kind, including goods and services) and foster care grants that are paid to the foster parents. Although the foster care grant is paid to the foster parent, the management of the CFCS has a legal obligation to ensure that all social grants are spent to meet the individual needs of the child in foster care.

The foster parents are responsible for taking over the care of the child in terms of providing a home for the child to live in, providing financial support, promoting the wellbeing of the child, promoting his/her rights, and guiding and directing the child. The recruitment, selection and appointment process of these employees/foster parents are done by the management of the CFCS, the community and by a social worker at a child protection organisation who is responsible for advising the Children's Court on suitable alternative care for a specific child. Criteria used for recruitment and selection include the age profile, the cultural background, household composition and specific personality characteristics of the prospective employee/foster parent. In order to confirm their status as employees of the CFCSs, the participating managers entered into an employment contract with the foster parent. This contract included conditions of employment, namely the period of employment, remuneration, leave, length of working week and hours, probation period as well as training needs.

Assistants were employed by the CFCS and had the responsibility to act as substitute parents when the foster parent was not available, and also to assist with general care issues such as assisting the foster children with homework. In some instances the assistant also acted as an older sibling to the foster children and assisted with important issues such as gender identification and the acquiring of important cultural skills.

Only one of the participating schemes had a full-time social worker, while the others contemplated appointing a social worker and relied on external social workers. The involvement of external social workers appears to be problematic.

The participating CFCSs also made use of volunteers to assist them either with the day-to-day care of the children or to provide specialised interventions such as occupational therapy and psychological interventions. The development and maintenance of different network structures were viewed as an important component of the management of CFCSs. These networks provided the necessary services and support to the children in their care to function as part of a community. Important networks include social workers responsible for foster care supervision and family reunification services, educational and medical structures where the child attends schools and receives medical treatment, and

different members in the community who support the CFCS with the integration of the foster children into the community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to operationalise a CFCS, the following recommendations are made:

- Engage in discussions with community members, legal structures and other relevant role players in the community in which the prospective CFCS wants to operate;
- Select the management board that will manage and provide strategic direction to the CFCS based on specific skills needed;
- Develop a financial model to ensure the funding of the CFCS, as well as the proper management of funds, donations and grants;
- Develop selection, recruitment and appointment criteria to appoint active members (foster parents);
- Decide on other human resources such as administrative personnel, social worker/s and assistants to the foster parents that the CFCS might need to provide the services to children;
- Consider the type of children in need of care and protection to whom the CFCS intends to provide alternative care;
- Decide on the nature of the care programme that the CFCS intends to provide to the children in need of care and protection, based on the specific needs of the children;
- Establish a network structure in the community in which they operate in order to ensure that the children in their care have access to all the community resources that they are entitled to.

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