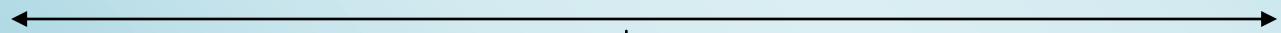# North Asian International Research Journal Consortium

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# Editorial Board

# An Exploration of the Challenges faced by Foster Children in Hwange District of Matabeleland North Province in Zimbabwe: Quest for Improved Care for Children in Foster Care.

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## ABSTRACT

*This study explored the challenges faced by foster children in Zimbabwe and was primarily undertaken in pursuit for improved care for children living in foster care in Hwange District of Matabeleland North Province. The survey research design was adopted and is best suited when the information the researcher needs should come directly from the individuals under study. A population comprising of foster children aged fifteen to eighteen years and a sample of 20 (N=20) participants conveniently selected from the target population was utilised. Interviews were used as the research instruments in the gathering of data and were preferred for their various advantages including the fact that they enabled the researchers to obtain rich and meaningful data viewed through the eyes of the participants. The Thematic Content Analysis Technique (TCAT) was used in analysing the findings. The major findings of the study were that while the foster family was found to be generally able to provide basic needs including food, shelter and education; lack of attachment affected the relationship between the foster child and the parent. Consequently, most foster children were noted to be emotionally affected by the separation from their biological family and general lack of parental attachment. Thus, this produced intense feelings of vulnerability, loneliness, emptiness and a desire for a fulfilling life; while discrimination and lack of freedom have also cast a dark shadow on the psychological health of most foster children. The study further revealed that some foster parents have less time for interaction with foster children and one of the common trends amongst foster children is that most of them generally have problems in trying to cope with the pressures and challenges in foster care. On the other hand, not all foster children experience challenges in foster families as some of them have since accepted their situation and are effectively copying. The study recommended, among other things, that relevant government ministries, departments, non-governmental and community-based organizations should support foster care arrangements through realistic policies and financing. Furthermore, foster parents should be provided with appropriate and adequate training meant to provide basic psychological and emotional support to foster children. In addition, community-based support groups and foster families should be conscientised on the critical need to provide foster children with maximal support including counseling in order to promote their adequate and normal growth and development.*
*Key words: challenges, attachment, orphaned and vulnerable children, foster children.*

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Globally, the care and welfare of Orphaned and Vulnerable Children (OVCs) has become a major concern and a topical issue in contemporary child protection discourse. The foster care model is one of the many approaches for caring for OVCs and in most communities; it has increasingly received widespread attention as a safety net from central government, civic society and other organisations. Notably, the adoption of the foster care approach has been a gradual paradigm shift from the institutionalisation of OVCs, and the underlying principle for adopting it has been that it is more appropriate to keep foster children and other OVCs in a set up that gives them the opportunity to interact with family and the community.

The category of OVCs range from orphaned children, children born of very poor parents, children born of aged and disabled and mentally challenged parents, children living on the streets, children infected and affected by HIV and AIDS and so on (ZimStat, 2014). However, despite having recorded a phenomenal success and gradually receiving pervasive acceptance in the modern world, the foster family care model has been shrouded with both positive and negative outcomes. Accordingly, this study found it imperative to investigate the challenges faced by foster children living in Hwange District of Matabeleland North Province in Zimbabwe.

### 1.1 Background to the Study

According to Perlmatter and Hall (2012), the foster-family care arrangement has become one of the most viable trends in caring for OVCs. This has largely been necessitated by the increasing number of OVCs which has been a result of many factors including the disintegration of the nuclear and extended family systems as well as the advent of the HIV and AIDS pandemic which has since left many children orphaned and vulnerable after the death of one or both parents. Naturally, foster children, like other any other children, require regular care for mere survival, and much more for them to develop the necessary skills and competencies for effective survival and development to adulthood.  Mvududu (2001) notes that, traditionally, both the family and community have been responsible for children's general care and welfare; where they played a nurturing role as well as the transmission of cultural and societal norms and values.

Best (2002) purports that with many children orphaned and vulnerable, most approaches, practices and policies in foster-caring have dwelt more on child care and welfare. However, while most of the care and attention, particularly in the developing world has been given to OVCs such that they grow with good cultural and societal norms and values, their experiences have been daunting particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa where resources are generally scarce and society's attitudes towards fostering have been mixed. In some instances, the psychological and emotional needs of foster children have been either neglected or taken for granted. More so, the voices and lived experiences of most foster children have not been heard enough to allow for the promotion of their strategic needs and expectations, which has also impeded their normal growth and development (Mvududu, ibid).

For example, the Government of the Republic Zimbabwe, as early as 1999, and in response to the impending crisis, developed and adopted a National Orphan Care Policy (NOCP) which sought to complement traditional methods of care and discouraged forms of care which removed children from their communities and culture. The

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policy recommended foster-care and adoption as the desired alternatives for children who did not have extended families to take care for them. The policy also discouraged institutional care and clearly states that institutionalisation should be regarded as the last resort after all efforts to secure an ideal care environment have been exhausted. It is believed that a child is more likely to cope if he or she lives in surroundings that are either familiar or similar to normal family and community set-ups. In order to reduce several potential challenges, an OVC should be left to be as close as possible to his or her community, a situation which the foster-care approach somewhat promotes (Georckel, 2004).

Traditionally, a child should be cared for in a family unit complemented by extended family networks. However, in the sad apparent situation affecting many countries particularly in predominantly HIV and AIDS affected Sub-Saharan Africa, every community has OVCs, a good number of whom are now placed under foster-care. There is generally an increasing number of foster families in Southern Africa as the extended family is usually overburdened and no longer able to cope. The negative lived experiences which most foster children face are usually a result of scarce resources or simply neglect by some foster parents. In some cases, the problems that foster children face are caused by foster systems of the country, as well as its culture, religion and so on (Powel, 2004). It is against this backdrop that the current study, therefore, sought to find out the challenges faced by foster children in the area under study.

## 1.2 Statement of the problem

Generally, the voices and lived experiences of most foster children have not been heard in order to help society evaluate the appropriateness and effectiveness of the foster- family care model. In some sections of society, the model has been criticized for exposing OVCs to a host of challenges including psycho-social problems. Little is known about the day to day experiences of foster children and this is compounded by the fact that the number of OVCs in need of alternative care arrangement including fostering  is on the increase, hence, the need to unveil the challenges faced by foster children.

## 1.3 Purpose and Sub-problems of the study

The purpose of the current study was to explore the challenges faced by foster children living in different foster homes in Hwange District of Matabeleland North Province in Zimbabwe. The study was guided by the following key sub-problems:

- To determine the need for and challenges caused by lack of 'attachment' in children
- What find out the day to day relationship between foster children and parents
- To establish the challenges faced by foster children in the area under study
- To suggest possible ways of improving the care and welfare of foster children.

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## 1.4 Significance of the study

It is envisaged that the significance of the current study is essentially that it will expose the challenges and other lived experiences of foster children living in different foster homes. Such findings are expected to be used for the improvement of the care and welfare of OVCs including children under foster care. The findings may assist responsible government Ministries and departments (such as the Department of Social Welfare in Zimbabwe) in their efforts to come up with effective guidelines and policies for the care and welfare of foster children. In addition, the findings may further motivate the civic and donor community to support effective foster-family care arrangements in order to promote their normal development. The findings are also expected to add to available knowledge on fostering as well as form a basis for future research by illuminating areas that need further investigation.

## 2.0 REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The review of related literature conceptualised the notions of 'fostering' and 'attachment' as well as reviewing the different challenges faced by foster children and some empirical studies on fostering.

## 2.1 The 'Fostering' Concept

The conceptualisation of the term 'fostering' has variations as it depends on several factors including setting and cultural context. Generally, 'fostering' is taking care of a child, usually for a limited time; without taking full legal guardianship. For Foster *et al,* (2009), the foster- family care model entails placing a child in the temporary care of a family other than his or her own as the result of problems or challenges within the birth family, or while critical elements of an adoption are being completed. Foster-care is, thus, placing a child in the temporary care of a family other than his or her own and is considered a full-time substitute care of children outside their own home by people other than their biological or adoptive parents or legal guardians. A 'foster parent' can be referred to as any person caring for a non-biological child whose parents cannot do so for one reason or the other and it includes a person providing full time care of a child or children. On the other hand, a 'foster child' is the name used to describe a child raised by someone who is not the child's natural or adoptive parent or parents, or simply a needy child who is either orphaned or vulnerable and living in a foster family, community or supported by intervention from a specific charitable organisation UNAIDS (2008).

As noted by Foster and Bertman (2007), the rise in the number of OVCs has become a common trend in most communities, and one of the related phenomenal developments has been the advent of foster-family care. This is typical of impoverished communities including Africa which has been described as a land that has been torn apart by war and disease, consequently becoming a predominantly problematic continent. In this regard, Sub-Saharan Africa has the largest population of OVCs, as in 2003, 12.3 per cent (43 million) of all children in the region were OVCs, nearly double the 7.3 per cent of children in Asia, and 6.2 per cent of children in Latin America and the Caribbean, who were OVCs (Foster and Bertman, ibid; UNAIDS, ibid). Most of these OVCs have been subjects for out-of-family care arrangements including foster-family care.

## 2.2 Children's need for attachment and challenges caused by lack of attachment

There are several theories proposed by social scientists particularly psychologists to explain the concept of 'attachment'. Generally, the term attachment is used in Social Science to describe an infant's tendency to seek physical and emotional closeness to particular individuals and to feel more secure in their presence. Traditionally, the belief is that the child's attachment to the mother naturally develops simply because she is the source of food, one of the infant's most basic needs. A series of experiments with monkeys have, however, shown that there is more to 'mother-child attachment' than just the mother being the source of food (Atkinson et al, 2000).  Berk (2007) argues that the nature and duration of attachment between the mother and the child determines the extent to which the child will feel emotionally attached. Most children naturally become emotionally attached to the mother as the mother is normally the most dominant figure in the child's early life. This attachment is also motivated by the fact that the mother gives birth and takes the leading role in nurturing the child. However, this attachment has to be broken at some point in order for the child to develop a separate sense of self, which will pave way for secondary attachment with significant others in the life of the child (Feldman and Papalia, ibid).

In relation to foster parenting, attachment generally implies an affectional bond or tie between an individual and an attachment figure; who is usually a foster parent or caregiver. Such a bond is usually reciprocal between the child and parent or caregiver, and the bond is essentially based on the child's need for safety, security and protection. The attachment theory also proposes that children attach to a parent or care giver instinctively, initially for the biological purpose of survival and ultimately for the psychological purpose of security. At a secondary level, 'attachment', therefore, implies the psychosocial relationship between a child and a parent, foster parent or caregiver (Fernald and Fernald, ibid). Myers (2006) resonates that the attachment theory illustrates how infants form attachments not only to biological parents, but to any significant other or consistent caregiver who is sensitive and responsive in social interactions with them.

The theory hypothesises that the quality of the social engagement between the child and attachment figure is more influential than the amount of time spent.  While the biological mother is usually the principal attachment figure, the role can be taken by anyone who behaves in a 'mothering' way over a period of time and this involves social interactions, signals and approaches. On the other hand, the theory further claims that fathers also have the potential of becoming principal attachment figures if they provide most of the child care and social interaction to the child (Baron, 2006; Schacter, 2009). Generally, a young child normally works back and forth between exploration of the environment and checking in with an attachment figure.

Children who lost their parents may suffer serious psychological consequences with respect to lack of attachment. If the primary attachment figure, who is expected to be either the mother or father is late, it therefore, means that there is no one who can immediately provide the basic attachment needs of the child. OVCs usually manifest this gap which often results in developmental problems or psychopathology for most of them. This essentially explains the causes of developmental and emotional problems often experienced by foster children as they lack an attachment to a biological figure while also often developing fragile and inconsistent attachment with a foster parent  (Baron, ibid).

## 2.3 Relationships in foster families and challenges faced by foster children

The subsequent separation of children from parents essentially deprives the children of crucial emotional and psychological security. The circumstances of becoming foster children as a result of parent's death or separation pose particular psychosocial challenges for both foster children and the non-biological parents. The sad experiences of foster children include disempowerment when witnessing the parent's separation, deterioration, pain and/or death. They also feel anxious that their source of livelihood and their ability to retain the family home after the parent's separation or death is under threat and so even if they are taken to a non-biological family, these emotions are still with them, hence, causing the relationship within the foster family not to be skeptical. More often than not, peers and ill-informed community members sometimes subject foster children to teasing and discrimination (Bertman, ibid).

Other factors affect the relationship between foster children and parents, and these include, period of detachment from their families, the age of the foster child, developmental milestones such as reaching puberty, time spent with the foster parents and other personal factors. On the other hand, due to economic challenges and other internal factors in the foster family, not every child will get the full attention they would need and deserve, let alone the foster child. This alone increases the psychological damage to the foster children concerned which is detrimental to their normal growth and development (Mussen, ibid; Diego, Field and Hernandez, ibid). The separation of foster children from their biological parents for any reason also shatters their sense of security, confidence and hope.

It is also very disturbing to some foster children when they think of their siblings that they were separated from because no one was willing to live with them at one place before they moved into foster families. In some instances, some unscrupulous and illiterate foster parents are sometimes moody and not all that friendly to their foster children; and may at one point unnecessarily remind the foster child that he or she should not forget that he or she is actually a 'foster child' and not a biological child in the family. All these factors have an aggregate psychological and emotional harm on foster children as the affected children would not stop thinking about the need for their 'real' family where they are cared for by their biological parents or at least by extended family members (Mvududu, ibid).

A number of recent studies have shown that foster children are more vulnerable than other children in many respects. For example, a foster child is more likely to drop out of school or to go to school not well supported as compared to a non-foster child. Using cross-sectional data from 10 Sub-Saharan African countries, Case *et al* (2000) cited in Bertman (2001) concluded that foster children most of whom are OVCs are less likely to be enrolled in schools than non-foster children with whom they live with. Consequently, most foster children tend to have a low intellectual capacity due to stress and depression resulting in them achieving low in school. Some of the problems of foster children include lack of support and attachment to the foster parents and they do not have access to be helped in school work where they do not understand because the foster parents might always be occupied at work or simply lack that attachment. Similar researches done in other parts of Sub-Saharan Africa found out that foster children experience more interruptions and loss of their education (Bertman, ibid).

In a study conducted in Namibia, Agyarko (2002) found out that mild child trauma was associated with most foster children, possibly having resulted in witnessing the separation or death of a parent or parents. The study also revealed that children in foster care self-report more stress and depression than children in intact nuclear and extended families. An anonymous Namibian Social Worker once acknowledged to the Agyarko (2002) study that:

*"Though the foster-family care model has been a resounding success in many parts of the world, we know that the foster care environment can have a detrimental effect on the intellectual and socio-emotional development of the foster child".*

This subjective admission on its own points to the question whether foster-family care is the most effective means for caring for OVCs.

In one study carried out in rural Uganda, high levels of psychological distress were found in foster children living with non-biological parents (Case *et al, ibid).* The problems of these foster children manifested in the form of unhappiness, moodiness, antisocial behaviour, anxiety, depression and anger. These psychological problems became more severe as the foster children became increasingly more conscious of their differential life opportunities with other children. In another related study conducted in Uganda, high levels of psychological distress were found in foster children and children who live with adopted parents (Perlmatter and Hall, 2012). The study also revealed that more parents in impoverished African communities are no longer living with all their siblings and this alone has resulted in problems which lead to the adoption and foster-parenting of some children. Thus, to this present day, siblings in impecunious communities are often split up as the extended family is unable to care for them. As noted by Worden (2005), problems such as multiple changes of residence, parents and care-givers who are strangers and to whom the child has no attachment are liable to make foster children face a host of psychological and emotional challenges.

In some parts of the world, it has been noted that the number of children in need of foster care is on the increase and there has also been a complementary increase in the number of people volunteering in foster- parenting. For example, a Duke University study highlighted an increase in the number of OVCs in African and Asian countries; most of whom are now in foster-care settings (Mukoyogo and Williams, 2001). For them, the study also found out that most children in fostering experience psychological problems which include neglect, emotional stress and depression. The study recommended among other things that it is better to implement or re-enforce the traditional family system and provide local communities and close relatives to take care of OVCs in order to avoid challenges associated with fostering and other out-of-family child care approaches. Furthermore, the study recommended that when employing the Safety Net Approach (SNA), the first port of call should be the biological family, and in the case of OVCs, the extended family becomes the best alternative for child care as it will provide the child with a sense of belongingness while at the same time providing a normal and conducive environment for development.

## 3.0 METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Research Setting and Design

The study was conducted in Hwange District of Matabeleland North Province in Zimbabwe.  Hwange is one of the seven districts of Matabeleland North Province, and the district has a population of 96 454, while the province has a population of 749 017 and an average household size of 4.5 (ZimStat, 2012). Hwange District is located in the North-West of Zimbabwe and the district falls in between the city of Bulawayo and the resort town of Victoria Falls. The study sought to explore the challenges faced by foster children living in Hwange, in an endeavour to improve the care for foster children and other orphaned and vulnerable children (OVCs).

The researchers adopted the survey research design which is best suited when the information the researcher needs should come directly from the individuals under study (Babbie, 2004). In the current study, the survey research design was considered within the qualitative research framework, which Denzin and Lincon (2005) define as a process of systematic enquiry into the meanings which people employ to make sense of their experiences and guide their actions. For Denzin and Lincon (ibid), the major advantage of qualitative research is that the researchers are able to get to the heart and soul of the issue in order to better understand the problem at stake. Thus, this meant that a deeper and holistic picture was realised by the current study regarding the challenges faced by foster children living in Hwange, for which findings may be generalized to communities of similar setting and culture.

### 3.2 Population and Sample

A population is a collection of objects, events or individuals having some common information that the researcher is interested in studying (Creswell, 2007). The population for this study comprised foster children aged from fifteen to eighteen years living in the area under study. The researchers found it impossible to include every element of the population in the research exercise; hence, the idea of sampling was conceived. Convenience sampling technique was used to identify the study sample and sampling involves using a smaller number of items or part of the target population to make conclusions about the whole population and it claims the advantages of low cost, increased speed in data collection as well as accurate and reliable information (Bailey, 2004).

Accordingly, the sample comprised 20 participants (N=20) who were interviewed individually in order to accomplish the study.  Grayson et al (2005) define a 'sample' as the actual number of participants that the researcher is going to work with. Convenience sampling was considered for the current study because it consisted of appropriate participants who happened to be in the right place at the right time. In line with Cohen et al (2007), this sampling technique, thus, involved choosing the nearest individuals to serve as respondents and continuing that process until the required sample size had been obtained or those who happened to be available and accessible at the time.

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### 3.3 Research Instruments

Research instruments are the tools used to gather data during a research and the success of any research is a function of the appropriateness of tools used to collect data during the study (Dyer, 2005). The researchers used in-depth interviews and utilised interview guides to gather the necessary information for the study. Interviews are viewed as 'sessions in which pre-association and hidden sources of feelings and beliefs are discussed generally through structured or unstructured questions administered by a skilled interviewer (Grayson et al, ibid). The researchers considered several advantages of using interviews including the encouragement of personal thought, respondent attentiveness to questions, and the ability of the interviewer to probe the interviewee further and to sense non-verbal feedback.

More so, interviews were preferred for the additional advantage that they enabled the researchers to obtain rich and meaningful data viewed through the eyes of the participants (Coolican, 2004). This was so because use of interviews is a qualitative method that permits direct observation of the people involved in the process and the ability to listen to what those people have to say. The suitability of the interview guides was tested through a pilot study conducted with four randomly selected foster children who were not part of the study. This helped the researcher to consolidate the interview guide by attending to unclear interview questions and also improving their clarity.

### 3.4 Data Collection Procedures

The first step taken by the researchers was to visit foster families to sensitize them about the study as well as seek for permission from foster parents to interview foster children under their care. Brief in-depth interviews were conducted with the foster children who were the participants. These interviews consisted of open-ended questions in order to allow the participants to openly disclose their thoughts, feelings and perceptions regarding the challenges they faced as foster children. The interview environment consisted of a child-friendly quiet room, which was conducive enough to provide privacy and a sense of security for the foster children who were the participants. Data on the challenges faced by foster children was accordingly gathered and then transcribed word for word. This helped the researchers to remember and revisit the entire process of the interview. The Thematic Content Analysis Technique (TCAT) was used in analysing research data, which allowed the researchers to incorporate emerging themes to give depth to themes from the interview guide. Data was then put in thematic categories and subcategories for easy interpretation.

Ethical issues were also considered in the current study. As noted by Creswell (ibid:p141), "Regardless of the approach to qualitative inquiry, a qualitative researcher faces many critical ethical issues that surface during data collection in the field and in analysis and dissemination of qualitative reports". Accordingly, the study respected participants' right to privacy and their freedom to participate as well as determining whether or not their opinions, attitudes, beliefs and values regarding their fostering can be made public. The study also took into account the right to protection against physical or emotional harm of the participants, that is, the researchers were not to reveal any information that may embarrass the participants or endanger their life. As succinctly stated by the

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Criteria of the American Anthropological Association (CAAA) (2002) cited in Robson (2009) 'a qualitative researcher should formally request people to participate in the study, and should seek their consent to participate in the study', and in this case, as the participants were minors, the consent of their parents was sought, hence, identified foster children participated in the study without being coerced to do so by the researchers.

## 4.0 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This section briefly discussed some of the major challenges faced by interviewed foster children in Hwange District of Matabeleland North province in Zimbabwe.

Most children in foster care reported being emotionally affected by the separation from their biological family, indicating that they missed their biological parents and siblings. This indicates that while the foster family may provide basic needs, the lack of attachment may affect the relationship between the foster child and the parent. The study revealed that separation of foster children from their biological parents produced intense feelings of vulnerability, loneliness, emptiness and a desire for a fulfilling life. According to the findings, '*a time always comes in the lives of children in foster care that they wish to stay with their parents'.* It is clear that children's psychological distress begins with a separation from a biological parent as they are left emotionally and physically vulnerable.

Due to the buildup of emotional trauma, feelings of loneliness, not having what they really desire in life and the unstoppable thoughts of wanting their biological parents back ended up in some foster children being depressed. For such children, depression caused them to feel that they are nothing in the world and are not worthy in any way. While foster parents are responsible for socialising foster children, their "parenting role" is not always recognized. For example, when children sometimes felt sad for missing their biological parents or have some kind of psychological problems, they would not talk to their foster parents because they lacked attachment and parental bond.  Under the circumstance, some parents, in turn, left even less time for interaction with foster children. Feelings of seclusion and discrimination have also cast a dark shadow on the psychological health and well being of many foster children. In line with previous findings by Mutanana and Gasva (2015), such vulnerable children are at greater risk of not reporting cases of abuse or violence, including sexual abuse, against them.

Most children in foster care openly indicated that they do not have their freedom anymore. This was found to be consisted with Nambi (1997)'s study cited in Binder (2004) which reported that the collective, closed style management in foster care generally limited children's physical, emotional and social space to interact with their relatives and peers outside the foster family. Most of these regulations are based on good intentions for the children's safety. This situation within the fostering care environment contradicts with many developmental needs of young children such as the need for an opportunity to mingle with peers outside the home as well as to explore and experience different social environments. However, the restriction by foster parents is often because the foster parents are worried that the children might get into trouble outside the home, so usually, foster children are made to stay in-doors or at least without leaving the home yard. In this regard, one of the interviewed participants reported that '*his life was not free at all and his social life was as good as dead*'. Due to these unfavourable

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conditions, some children in foster homes found it difficult to make friends outside the foster home and consequently ended up developing anti-social behaviours, low self-esteem and no confidence.

Some foster children indicated that time comes in their lives that they wished their biological parents were around. They felt life could have been much different and better had their biological parents were with them. The separation of foster children from their biological parents often forced them to take increased adult responsibilities which they are not prepared and ready for. Thus, the majority of foster children reported, for example; over-working, waking up too early and being assigned adult responsibilities by foster parents in the disguise of '*training them for adulthood'*. On judging that the unfairness towards them was based on foster care status, most foster children usually found no one to confide their problems and expectations, hence, ended up feeling further discriminated against and dejected.

However, not all foster children felt pains in being separated from their biological families, neither did they develop psychological and emotional stress due to their foster care status. Such foster children did not feel discriminated against and depressed, nor being confined to the foster home; hence were able to deal with the pressures and challenges of foster care life. Some of the children in this category indicated that they did not know their biological parents and siblings, therefore, did not feel the pains of separation or detachment from their biological family. This positive group of foster children seemed to have high self-esteem and confidence, and were able to socialize and make friends whenever they are given a chance to mingle with their peers. They also had time for extra-curricular activities which was noted to be necessary for relieving stress and emotional burden. However, other participants revealed that even if they felt depressed, at times they have been able to manage it and have learnt to replace negative thinking with positive thinking that is full of hope and anticipation. This observation was found to be consistent with previous research findings by Toit (2004) which indicated that, due to personal determination, some foster children felt that they could make it in life and that there was always a possibility for a brighter life ahead

Every child should get the opportunity to go to school and a successful child's education is based on a combination of a good school and home education. In foster care, the foster parent should take care of the foster child's educational needs including paying school fees and providing the child with school stationery; should urge the foster child to study hard, supervise his or her homework, and make sure that the child gets to school on time. However, some foster children complained that there was not enough support to help them to effectively do their school work, or even study for the examinations; hence, their school performance has always been poorer than other children. This problem could also be alluded to the harsh economic environment leading to the foster family failing to cope and more often than not, forced to discriminate against foster children in the distribution of resources including educational support and attention.

To complement the findings from the interviews, the researchers, who were themselves part of the research instrument as recommended by Cresswell (ibid) in a qualitative study of this nature, observed that some of the participants pretended to be strong and brave, but the researchers could tell that the concerned foster children were just pretending. Some of the foster children looked vividly sad, fearful and emotional, while some seemed to

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have accepted the realities of their situation and were ready to face the challenges of their foster lives head-on. A few foster children seemed to have mixed feelings, as the researchers could, for example, observe that for some of them, a smile was followed by tears.

## 5.0 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Basing on the above findings, the current study concluded that:

- The foster family was generally able to provide foster children with basic needs including food, shelter and security
- Lack of attachment, however, resulting from foster children's separation from their biological parents negatively affected the relationship between the foster child and the parent as there was no bond between the two parties
- Foster children were often forced to take up increased adult responsibilities they were not ready or prepared for; and on realising that the unfairness was based on their foster care status, most of them consequently felt further discriminated against and dejected
- Most foster children developed psychological and emotional problems which often produced intense feelings of vulnerability, loneliness, stress, emptiness and a desire for a fulfilling life
- Most children in foster care do not have their freedom anymore, and because they found it difficult to make friends outside the foster home, they ended up developing anti-social behaviours, low self-esteem and no confidence
- Discrimination and lack of freedom have cast a dark shadow on the psychological health of most foster children
- The upsurge of emotional trauma, feelings of loneliness and not having what they really desired in life compounded with the unstoppable denial thoughts of wanting their biological parents back ended up in some foster children being depressed
- Some foster parents have limited time for interaction with their foster children, hence one of the common trends amongst foster children is that most of them are maladjusted and have problems in trying to cope with the pressures and challenges in foster care
- Foster children who did not know their biological parents and siblings did not feel as much pain of separation or detachment from their biological family like foster children who experienced the separation or death of their parent or parents
- Some foster children's educational needs were not well supported to effectively help them do their school work including studying for the examinations, hence, their school performance has always been poorer than other children
- Only a few foster children seemed to have mixed feelings which ranged from acceptance to rejection of their foster-care life
- Not all foster children experience challenges in foster families as some of them have since accepted their situation and are effectively copying

- Thus, even if some foster children felt somehow depressed, some have been able to manage it and have learnt to replace negative thinking with positive thinking characterised by hope and anticipation, hence, believed in the possibility for a brighter life ahead

Basing on the above findings and conclusions, the following are some of the recommendations made by the current study

- Relevant government ministries and departments should support foster care arrangements by developing and enforcing realistic policies which ensure that financial support and other sources are used for the benefit of foster families
- Non-governmental and community-based organizations should be given space to make direct interventions meant to directly benefit foster children and other OVCs
- Foster parents should be provided with appropriate and adequate training meant to provide basic psychological and emotional support to foster children and other OVCs
- Community-based support groups should be established to identify and monitor the welfare and protection of foster children and other OVCs
- Families and communities should be conscientised on the critical need to provide foster children and other OVCs with a sense of belonging and personal freedom in order to promote self-esteem and confidence in foster children
- The guidance and counseling of foster children should be enforced in all appropriate social institutions in order to espouse foster children and other OVCs' mental health. This is based on the understanding that children's mental health is potentially critical in ensuring their adequate and normal growth and development.

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