



Publisher

African Journal of Social Work

Afri. j. soc. work

© National Association of Social Workers-Zimbabwe/Autor(s)

ISSN Print 1563-3934

ISSN Online 2409-5605

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Indexed & Accredited with: African Journals Online (AJOL) | University of Zimbabwe Accredited Journals (UZAJ) | SCOPUS (Elsevier's abstract and citation database) | Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) | Society of African Journal Editors (SAJE) | Asian Digital Library (ADL) | African Social Work Network (ASWNet) | Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) - South Africa | SJR | CNKI - China | Journal Publishing Practices and Standards (JPPS) | EBSCO

“Every foster parent is crying...”: Psychosocial challenges faced by appointed foster care parents in Bojanala, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Foster care is a temporary care for children who are abused, have been abandoned by parents or have lost their parents as a result of death. Social workers work with different stakeholders to place the child in the care of a foster parent. Moreover, social workers are expected to render quality services to all the foster care beneficiaries, but that is not always the case. Thus, this study focused on describing psychosocial challenges and foster care experiences faced by appointed foster care parents in the Bojanala District of the North West Province in South Africa. The researchers used a phenomenological design to describe the lived experiences of appointed foster parents on psychosocial challenges caring for foster children in Bojanala, South Africa. The researchers interviewed four social workers as key informants and five foster parents using semi-structured interviews. Data were analysed using thematic analysis. The findings indicated several psychosocial challenges, all revolving around inadequacy, namely; the lack of support for foster parents, the lack of therapeutic support for foster children, and the lack of a relationship between social workers and foster parents, further, reported several foster care experiences, namely; no clear explanation of the purpose, poor record keeping, and poor working relationship. Researchers recommend that there should be an intervention programme aimed at equipping foster care parents on ways to build a harmonise relationship with their foster children and social workers.

KEY TERMS: foster care; intervention; parent; psychosocial challenges; social workers; South Africa

KEY DATES

Received: August 2022

Revised: October 2022

Accepted: November 2022

Published: December 2022

Funding: None

Conflict of Interest: None

Permission: None

Ethics approval: North-West University Research Ethics Regulatory Committee (NWU-139 00121-14-A9).

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Current and previous volumes are available at:

<https://africasocialwork.net/current-and-past-issues/>



How to reference using ASWNet style:

Mmolokoe K. A., Matlakala F. K., Vrugt, M.C., et al (2022). “Every foster parent is crying...”: Psychosocial challenges faced by appointed foster care parents in Bojanala, South Africa. *African Journal of Social Work*, 12(6), 314-324.

INTRODUCTION

Foster care has long been a viable option for institutional care for children in need of assistance. The Children's Act of 1960 originally included the idea of "foster care". Children who required care were initially put in foster care with unrelated families lawfully under the so-called "traditional" foster care paradigm. However, foster care changed in the 21st century with the introduction of the Children's Act (38 of 2005). Since the adoption of the Children's Act, about 80% of children who are now in foster care are being cared for by family members, which is known as kinship foster care. Kinship care refers to children being looked after by relatives. Relatives are the preferred resource for a child's connections with the family of origin. Therefore, kinship foster care is often considered a type of family preservation service. Social workers aim to create stability when placing the child under foster care; thus, family relatives were considered first. There are two types of foster care, namely informal and formal foster care. Formal fostering occurs when a social worker or private agency decides who, when and why to place children in a family with a court order for a predetermined amount of time. Informal foster care happens when a relative decides to care for the child without going through the whole process of formal foster care. The majority of families and communities look after children on an informal basis without being aware that they are doing so. They are motivated by their love and enthusiasm for helping needy youngsters. This introduction is followed by the background to the study, the methodology used to collect the data, the findings, a discussion of the findings, and the conclusion.

BACKGROUND

Formal foster care is subsidised by the government through monthly payment of foster child grants. This form of care was utilised in a stable manner over some decades and, from 1960 onwards, the number of children in foster care never rose above 40 000 (Konijn et al., 2019; Mogale, 2019; Skelton, 2012). However, recently the situation changed dramatically, with the number of children in foster care showing a marked increase. In June 2015, it was reported that around 519,031 foster parents received foster child grants from South African Social Security Agency (SASSA Statistical Report, 2015). Several authors have noted that an increase in the number of children receiving foster care services is associated with HIV/AIDS-related death of parents and the high unemployment rate, medical negligence, physical abuse, runaway behaviour, and negligence (Kelly, 2020; Konijn et al., 2019; Leathers et al., 2019; Mnisi & Botha, 2016; Ngwenya, 2011). Moreover, Fortunate (2016: 13) asserted that foster care caters for children who experienced different forms of abuse and neglect. This means that foster care does not cater for orphans only but also for every vulnerable child or those who need proper care and protection.

The placement of children in foster care has an entry and exit point. In terms of section 159/186 of the Children's Act, a child can stay in foster care until the end of the year in which they turn 18 years old (RSA, 2005). Again, section 176 gives the child the liberty to apply to remain in alternative care until the age of 21 years. According to Mnisi and Botha (2016), Shaw et al. (2020), and Du Toit et al. (2016), the ideal exit point from foster care is not always reached because foster care often breaks down. Various factors can contribute to the disruption of foster care, namely conduct problems, emotional difficulties, aggression and inappropriate sexual behaviour. In South Africa, Carter and van Breda (2015) noted that there should be additional support and resources that would be used to assess the prospective foster parents. Equally, Ntshongwana and Tanga (2018) found that there is a dearth of recent African literature on foster parents as many scholars who write on foster care are from the United States and Britain. Thus, in the United Kingdom (UK), prospective foster parents are recruited, educated and provided with therapeutic services before being appointed as foster parents (Bergström et al., 2020; Johnson, 2005; Schoemaker et al., 2020).

There is growing evidence that shows foster care is faced with several challenges. Several authors discovered that the number of foster care applications is multiplying rapidly (Bungane, 2007; Van der Westhuizen, 2011; Mmusi et al., 2022). The rate at which the demand for foster care is growing makes it difficult for social workers to manage their workload (Brown, Walters, & Jones, 2019; Brown, Alderson, Kaner, McGovern, & Lingam, 2019; Ngwenya & Botha, 2012). Due to re-entry, it is not easy for social workers to maintain the increased rate of foster care (Finster & Norwalk, 2021; Rolock et al., 2019; Wulczyn et al., 2020). Other challenges are systematically related, such as lack of human resources, poor infrastructure, and lack of resources to care for children. These challenges are not easily overcome by social workers.

METHODOLOGY

The researcher opted for a phenomenological research design to obtain descriptive data from the foster parents on their psychosocial challenges faced by appointed foster care parents in the Bojanala District of the North-West Province. Accordingly, Delpont, Fouché and Schurink (2011) enunciated that a phenomenological design seeks to understand the individual's experiences regarding their situation. In this context, researchers used a phenomenological design to describe the psychosocial challenges faced by appointed foster care parents in the

Bojanala District, in North-West Province of South Africa. The researchers targeted social workers and foster parents in the Bojanala District. Purposive sampling was used to identify and select participants according to the inclusion criteria. To be included in the study, foster care parents had to care for male or female foster children between the ages of 12 and 18 years. Researchers sampled five foster care parents and four social workers from Rustenburg in the Bojanala District to participate in the study.

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews with the aid of an interview guide. Interviews were approximately one hour in duration. They were conducted by the first author at participants' homes where it was most convenient and private for them. Participants were interviewed in Setswana to accommodate and consider their proficiency in their home language. The generated data were analysed by the third author by using thematic analysis as guided by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021). To ensure the credibility of the findings, Nowell et al. (2017); Chilisa, (2014) and Reviere, (2001) enunciated that there should be another person who will validate the findings. In this paper, the fourth reviewer peer-reviewed the third author's analysis.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the North-West University Research Ethics Regulatory Committee (NWU-00121-14-A9) before the study was conducted. Furthermore, the North-West provincial office of the Department of Social Development (DSD) provided institutional gatekeeper permission. Before data generation, written informed consent was obtained from participants to be interviewed as well as for the interview to be audio-recorded. Some additional ethical issues were considered, such as avoiding foreseeable harm, ensuring voluntary participation and maintaining privacy, anonymity and confidentiality throughout the entire research process.

FINDINGS

The thematic data analysis generated two categories of psychosocial challenges and foster care experiences, comprising six themes, specifically (i) the lack of support for foster parents, (ii) the lack of therapeutic support for foster children, (iii) the lack of relationship The foster care experiences are: (iv) no clear explanation of the purpose (v) poor record keeping, (xv), and poor working relationship between social workers and foster care parents.

Lack of support for foster parents

A well-equipped and trained foster parent will be able to safeguard the well-being of the child. Durand (2007) established that the training of foster parents is of paramount importance and foster parents should be provided with information to ensure that they understand their roles and function as foster parents. Caring for a child is not easy. Providing foster parents with information and training will assist foster parents to use the acquired skills to better equip themselves and meet the needs of the child as well as improve placement stability. Regardless of the assertion made by Durand, in this study, the researchers found that the majority of foster parents were lacking training. One of the participants echoed:

[S]ocial workers are not supportive; we don't have information that can assist us to care for the foster children. Children are informed more than us as parents; hence, they can manipulate us. They learn things from school, social networks, the internet, television and friends. We also need workshops to be able to parent our foster children. (Foster parent #1)

In corroboration, another foster parent said:

[E]ven though these children know us and we know them as we are aunts, grandmothers, brothers and sisters. The fact remains they are not our biological children, and it is difficult to parent the other person's child. We do our level best to raise them the same way we raised our children. My foster child once told me that I am abusing him because his mother is deceased. Social workers need to teach us how to deal with these children. Every foster parent is crying about the behaviour of these children. (Foster parent #2)

Another foster parent indicated that due to a lack of training, she does not know how to discipline the child under her guardianship. She asserted this by stating the following:

After the passing of our parents, I decided to stay with my siblings and it is not easy to care for them as they are teenagers. They don't listen to me, it is stressful to deal with them, and losing my parents is painful, I am only 21 years old and faced with responsibilities that are two big. My siblings are teenagers,

other one is 15 years old and the other one is 17 years old. I am unable to discipline them.... (Foster parent #3)

However, in their defence, social workers who were interviewed in the study expressed that they try to assist but are failing. One of the social workers said:

Social workers want to support foster parents, but the conditions do not allow them to perform their best. There is a shortage of social workers and tools of trade such as transport are hindering factors to service delivery. (Social worker #1)

In corroboration, another social worker averred:

[F]oster care training manuals are also needed to make the training more effective. (Social worker #4)

Lack of therapeutic support for foster children

Adjustment to a new living arrangement cannot be an easy process and often requires emotional support. Morgan (2012) enunciated that those children who are moved to other areas often experience different forms of the abuse whereas others are neglected by their caregivers. Due to the abuse and neglect that children face, it is only prudent for foster children to receive therapeutic support before placement. In this study, the foster care parent participants indicated that foster children are not provided with any form of therapeutic support. One of the foster parents said:

... I have problems with the behaviour of my foster child; he is always moody and he is not respecting me. After school, he goes out with friends and comes back home during the night around 20h00 ... we fight over the grant, and he once stole a post bank book and withdrew the money from it. He wants expensive clothes and phones; when I tell him that we cannot afford them, we fight. I reported the child's behaviour several times to the social worker, and she (the social worker) promised me that she will come to my family to talk to the child but she never came. (Foster parent # 4)

However, social workers feel that more social workers are needed to render foster care interventions. The following are the sentiments expressed by one of the participants (Social worker # 2):

[W]e need more manpower for social workers to give attention to all the work they need to do. Foster care also needs to be a specialisation that will facilitate quality foster care intervention throughout the process. The majority of foster children have lost their parents through death. Therapeutic services are needed to help these children deal with the loss. Foster parents also need support, since the majority of them are relatives and even family members of the foster children, they lost children, sisters, brothers, uncles and parents. [The] reality is that social workers are not rendering therapeutic interventions to foster care beneficiaries. (Social worker #2).

Lack of relationship between social workers and foster parents

One of the contributory factors to the high incidence of foster care placements not being reviewed within a two-year period is the insufficient working relationship between foster care parents and social workers. A professional helping relationship with the client system is the foundation of a harmonious foster care intervention process. Many helping professionals consider the professional helping relationship to be more important than the helping strategies used to address the client system's problems (McClam & Woodside, 2005). It appears from this study that foster care parents and social workers meet only sporadically. One of the foster parents shared:

... the last time I saw the social worker was when we were at court. (Foster parent #5)

Conversely, social workers indicated that they meet foster parents and children in groups as they cannot have or hold individual sessions. One of the social workers said:

It is impossible to meet with foster parents and foster children individually in their respective foster homes due to other responsibilities that social workers are faced with. Group work makes it possible for social workers to monitor the placements in large numbers. The challenge remains with families that need individual attention as they have never been attended properly. (Social worker #3).

No clear explanation of the purpose

Establishing assessments and investigations during placements is essential. The Framework for Social Welfare services (Department of Social Development 2013a: 38) emphasizes that during the assessment phase the social worker should schedule an appointment if not yet done, and conduct assessment by applying different techniques. For instance, standard tests, drawings, and interviews, in order to compile assessment reports which includes identifying a need for the service and recommending a plan of action for specific intervention.

The social worker interviewed me in her office, she indicated that she wants to write the report that will be used by court to decide on the case, we had a very long session since the questions were many and I was expected to answer all of them. (Foster parent # 9).

Poor record keeping

It is important that the department of Social Development has good record keeping to not compromise confidentiality of clients' information. Unfortunately, little attention is paid to record management in government departments, not excluding the Department of Social Development (Ngoepe, 2008 & Ngoepe, 2019).

I first applied for foster care in 2011 January, and I was told that the social worker will come at home, the social worker never came. In 2012 September I came to make a follow up since I waited for so long, I was told that my application form and all the documents I have submitted have disappeared. (Foster parent # 7).

In support of what Foster parent # 7 has said above, Social worker # 4 said:

Social workers are not doing well in record keeping, most of intakes and other important documents disappear before they can be filed properly and also due to insufficient office space and high workload, it is quite easy to forget where you put the documents (Social worker # 4).

Based on the experience of Foster parent # 7 and social worker's opinion, it could be that confidentiality is compromised which is unethical according to the South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP, 2012: 14). Confidentiality must be understood in the context of the right to privacy. Cognisance should also be taken of the fact the right to privacy is enshrined in Chapter 2 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (section 14 of the constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Act 108 of 1996). The ethical standard aimed at protecting the privacy of the client system must be held in the highest regards (SACSSP, 2012: 14).

Poor working relationship

Department of Social Development faces a challenge a human resource, leading poor service delivery, and backlog (Oleribe, et. al, 2019 & Muleya, 2020). These challenges affects both service provider and receiver.

I nearly gave up because of the way social worker spoke to me when I was applying for foster care. She was very much aggressive to me when I told her that I don't know the father of my grandchild saying I am not telling her the truth. (Foster parent # 20).

However, in their defence, social workers who were interviewed in the study expressed that they have backlog, other duties to execute, systematic issues (lack of resources). One of the social workers said:

There are number of reasons why social workers do not assist clients on time; foster care applications come in large numbers to the office. Currently I am sitting with 28 foster care applications that I have never attended and seven placements that I am still busy preparing for court. I also have a caseload of 170 foster care placements that I should monitor. Over and above foster care caseload, I have about 98 intakes of other clients (marital disputes, Social Relief of Distress, children with anti-social behaviour, family conflicts, substance abuse, parenting plans) that I need to work on, and new cases are reported in the office on a daily basis. I render crisis interventions, also have a target for awareness campaigns; I supervise auxiliary social workers and expected to provide support in coordination of the program. I applied for subsidised car in 2010 that I never received. (Social worker # 2).

In corroboration, another social worker asserted:

Many foster care placements that are attended on time are those of the children who lost both parents through death. The families where only one parent is deceased and the other one is alleged to be unknown takes time as foster care applicants do not want to tell the truth about the other parent's whereabouts because they want the grant. In our office we work with a magistrate who is very strict, she refuse to grant these foster care placements unless advertisement is done, which is currently not possible as we were told that the budget for advertisement is not available. (Social worker # 5).

The plan by the Department of Social Development to deal with fast-tracking the management of foster care cases backlog at Bojanala District shows that in December 2014 social workers at Bojanala District were faced with 5 364 foster care backlog. In the Department of Social Development Bojanala District, the concept backlog describes all the cases not attended to in 90 days (Department of Social Development, 2014: 01). The general finding from the aforementioned is that only a few foster care applications tend to be finalised within the recommended time. This is attributed to the fact that social workers are faced with a high caseload which delays completion of many cases. The findings indicate that the high number of caseloads makes it difficult for the social workers to monitor all the cases because they have other commitments besides foster placements.

DISCUSSION

Lack of support for foster parents

The study revealed that the appointed foster parents lack support from social workers. The foster parents indicated that foster care parents' training would be a beneficial input in equipping foster parents with the necessary skills to protect and nurture children in their care. The unavailability of training for foster care parents is identified as a gap in this study. Social workers' concern in this study is the shortage of manpower and foster care training manuals to be used in the training of foster care parents. It will be advisable for low middle-income countries (South Africa) to adapt and contextualize a training manual from high income countries for all new carers, which includes essential information and policies, procedures and guidelines for foster parents. For instance, Bojanala social workers do not have a clear manual that they can use to support the foster parents. This is a call to the Department to develop manuals that can be used to assist social workers in offering support to foster parents. Again, the shortage of social workers in the field is a thorny issue that the South African government should investigate. Social workers ought to offer education and support to the appointed foster care parents. In other countries such as Australia and Botswana, support is of paramount importance. For instance, Maundeni (2009) found that, since 2006, social workers employed by ChildLine in Botswana have also been training prospective foster parents on how to provide foster care. On the other hand, McHugh (2013) found that in Australia, foster care applicants are required to undertake an initial training programme before being approved as foster parents. What occurs in other countries is not a reflection of what occurs in Bojanala.

Lack of therapeutic support for foster children

Appointed foster parents indicated that they lack therapeutic support for foster children. The foster parents stated that foster children tend to have anger and behavioural challenges. These foster children who exhibit these behavioural and emotional difficulties should receive counselling so that they are also supported as they must change or make adjustments in their lives. In a study conducted by Brown, Sebba and Luke (2014), it was established that foster children tend to need more emotional support than other children. Social workers can offer emotional support to deviant children by conducting continuous home visits. However, in Bojanala, foster parents have expressed their concerns as they have noted that social workers do not offer emotional or therapeutic support to foster children during and after the placement process. Even when they report the incident, the social worker will promise to come visit, but do not honour the promise.

This study revealed that therapeutic intervention is critical in addressing the emotional and behavioural needs of both foster children and foster parents. However, it is noticeable that social workers do admit that they need to provide therapeutic support, but they are not offering it. According to Sheafor and Horejsi (2006), one of the roles of social workers is to provide counselling to clients. In this study, the researchers have found that social workers do not provide counselling to foster children and foster parents. As a result, some of the foster children who experience unresolved issues tend to take out all their frustrations on the foster care parent. The above assertion from the social worker points out that with kinship placements foster parents are also dealing with the loss. Therapeutic interventions are therefore critical to both the foster child and foster parent. The researchers are of the view that emotional support can help to strengthen a working relationship between the social worker, foster children and foster care parents. Evidence from this study suggests that social worker intervention processes in foster care placements have not yet reached the desired quality. Though social workers engage in the process of assisting foster care beneficiaries, many gaps have been identified through this study. The establishment of a

professional working relationship came out as a major challenge throughout the process of foster care interventions.

No clear explanation of the purpose

The study revealed that there is no clear explanation of the purpose of assessment. Foster parents are aware that they will be standard tests, drawings, and interviews for them before they can start the process of being a foster parent. As supported by the Framework for Social Welfare services (Department of Social Development 2013a: 38), before any placement takes place social workers have to make an assessment to ensure that the parents qualify. The study further revealed that social workers use only interviews as a technique of assessment. Other techniques such as the standard tests and drawings are never used. Compton et al (2005:207) state that interviews are only viable if the environment is conducive for the participants. Ecological theory emphasises the power of environment on the influence of people. During the assessment, the ecological environment where assessment is conducted with client system determines the nature of client's honest participation. The study shows that social workers are faced with challenges that restrain them from doing quality assessment. Shortage of resources such as transport and limited office space available to social workers were established as hindering factors to foster care assessment.

Poor record keeping and working relations

The study revealed that there is poor record keeping. This makes it difficult for both social workers and foster parents. Due to no office space (poor infrastructure) in the government, it makes it difficult for social workers to keep records for their clients. Reamer (2005: 325) indicates that comprehensive recording of the client system's information is necessary as it does not only support quality service delivery to the individuals, but it is also a basis for collaboration and coordination of services hence networking with other societal systems. Poor working relationship was reported. Foster parents barely had a relationship with social workers. Foster parents did not enjoy the process, felt that social workers are aggressive towards them. There is a mistrust between social workers and foster parents. However, the social workers in their defense they reported burnout, work related stress, backlog, other duties to execute, and systematic issues (lack of resources). This implies that the working environment is not conducive, leading to poor performance at work. Brown et al. (2015); Tonheim, and Iversen (2019) revealed that availability of social workers to provide emotional support is highly appreciated by foster parents. Emotional support can help to strengthen a working relationship between the social worker, foster children and foster parents.

Implications for social work education and practice

The study findings revealed that foster parents need therapeutic help and that social workers, due to their educational background, should assume the role of an educator. As an educator, social workers should provide education to prospective foster parents and prepare them on the ways how to care for the children. Moreover, social workers could also run social support groups wherein foster parents would meet and discuss some of the challenges that they are facing when caring for foster care children. In those groups, various strategies and coping mechanisms could be shared amongst members to better build the relationship with their foster children and social workers.

CONCLUSION

This study has accentuated psychosocial challenges and foster care experiences by appointed foster care parents in the Bojanala District. In the study, social workers indicated that their inability to render efficient support and service to the appointed foster parents is due to high workload and shortage of resources, including office space. The high workload contributed to the delay in the finalisation of foster care applications and monitoring of foster care placements. Shortage of resources, including transport, budget and insufficient office space, limits social workers' assessment and investigation. Insufficient office space compromises the confidentiality of the client's information. On that score, the DSD should ensure the effectiveness of foster care intervention for beneficiaries to allocate the resources needed. In essence, there should be increasing manpower (social workers and supervisors), and the provision of adequate office accommodation, transport and electronic equipment to social workers. The foster care workload ratio per social worker should be determined and implemented and the South African Council for Social Services Profession (SACSSP) should commit to the development of foster care as a speciality within the social work profession. Moreover, social workers must play a leading role in protecting the child from circumstances that might harm their well-being if the family does not commit to dealing with the identified challenges. In addition, to providing financial support and therapeutic and empowerment programmes

as necessary, the social worker should continue to provide support services to the foster family. An ongoing monitoring and evaluation process is necessary to determine if the intervention is successful and if the intervention should be continued, changed or terminated. The following are recommendations which were drawn from the research findings and conclusion:

- It is necessary to conduct a feasibility study to identify all the resources necessary to ensure quality foster care services.
- To inform improved quality foster care services for current and future foster children and parents, research should be conducted on services provided to foster children who are currently placed in foster care.
- It would be useful to conduct a study that compares South African foster care models with those of other international foster care systems to recommend how foster care parents could improve their foster care skills.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

There are numerous limitations to this study, including the fact that the data were only generated at the social development offices in the Bojanala District of the North-West province. Consequently, there is a need for more extensive qualitative studies in a variety of settings across other South African provinces to increase the generalisability of the findings. Some participants among the foster parents and children were reluctant to provide honest information because they wanted to create a positive impression of foster care. Future studies should incorporate strategies to overcome impression management. The study's limited participation of female foster parents and relatives creates the possibility of gender bias. In future studies, it would be beneficial to include male foster care parents to build on our findings.

Declarations

In this study, the authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest, and no funding was received. Ethical approval had been obtained prior to data being generated. Each co-author participated in the research process, and their inclusion in the publication has been gained. Moreover, this manuscript is original and is not under review elsewhere nor has it been submitted to any other journal.

Authors' contribution

Author	Contribution
MMOLOKOE, Keogile Abel	Apprehended the idea and drafted the manuscript
VRUGT, Mariette de Chavonnes	Apprehended the idea and drafted the manuscript
MATLAKALA, Frans Koketso	Modifies and drafted the methods
TSABEDZE, Wandile Fundo	Modifies and drafted the methods
ERASMUS, Petro	Edited the drafted Manuscripts
MAPALING, Curwyn	Oversees contributions and corresponds with the Editor, reworked the entire manuscript

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