

Exploring the Experiences of Biological Children Living with Foster Children

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the study was to explore the living experiences of biological children in homes with foster children in Zwelitsha, Eastern Cape, South Africa. Qualitative in nature, the study used a sample of 30 participants and data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Purposive sampling was used to select biological children. Consent to participate in the study was obtained from both the participating children and their parents. Data were analysed according to themes that emerged from the interviews. The findings of the study revealed that fostering had both a positive and negative impact on biological children. Furthermore, the findings indicated that there were also children who had ambivalent experiences. The positive effects on biological children come from gaining new experiences from foster children while the negative and ambivalent experiences might emanate from poor preparation by their parents and social workers during the process of foster-care placement. It is concluded that foster-care placement has both positive and negative effects on the lives of biological children of foster parents. It is recommended that an early and detailed discussion that includes all stages of the foster-care placement be undertaken by foster parents together with their biological children before they decide to take in foster children.

Keywords: biological children; foster-care placement; foster children; foster parents; experiences

Introduction

Over the past two decades, there has been an increase of the amount of research conducted internationally to better understand the environment of foster-care placement and to find strategies that can improve foster children and foster parents' experiences of

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fostering (Duffy 2013). However, most of these studies overlook biological children's experiences about foster-care placement (Williams 2016). Policy, research, legislation and practice ignored the experiences of this important group of individuals who are seriously affected by foster-care placement (Noble-Carr, Farnham, and Dean 2014). The lack of literature on the experiences of biological children of fostering parents is of concern (Duffy 2013). This concern underpins the need for further investigation into biological children's experiences about foster-care placement because the existing research indicates an increased risk of a foster-care breakdown if foster parents are living with their own children (Thompson, McPherson and Marsland 2014). The research question of this paper is: What are the experiences of biological children living in the same households with foster children? The paper begins with a synopsis of the problem statement and an overview of the literature review. This is followed by a brief description of the study area and research method. The findings are presented next and are followed by a succinct discussion. The paper progresses to the conclusion as well as the recommendations emanating from the findings of the study.

Statement of the Problem

According to Serbinski (2017), a foster family may include biological children of foster parents and foster children. Biological children are the most people who are negatively affected by the constant changes caused by foster-care placement. These changes create a family lifestyle that is not normal for biological children. During placement, foster children and biological children develop relationships, but there are aspects that negatively affect their relationships. These aspects include biological children not having enough time with their parents and also the loss of parental attention (Twigg and Swan 2007). In addition, biological children are sometimes exposed to the challenging behaviours of foster children such as physical aggression, bullying and/or stealing. Höjer, Sebba and Luke (2013) maintain that the most difficult time for biological children is when foster children leave their homes in unplanned situations, which might cause them to suffer from emotional loss, sadness and grief.

According to Sutton and Stack (2013), when communication is opened between members of the family, parents are viewed as pillars of support to their own children. Biological children may suffer from stress if their parents do not support them and that on its own can negatively affect their relationship with foster children and other members of the family (Anderson 2012). Such stresses include biological children having to share everything with foster children (Noble-Carr, Farnham, and Dean 2014). Fostering stress sometimes makes biological children feel neglected by their own families. Therefore, this study will help foster parents to know what impact foster care has on their own children. It will also help social workers to adjust their services to foster families.

Literature Review

This section deals with a brief literature review. Both the positive and the negative experiences of biological children of a fostering family are of special interest in this review. According to Höjer, Sebba and Luke (2013), living with foster children could obviously have a tangible impact on the everyday lives of biological children.

Positive Experiences of Biological Children on Having Foster Children in Their Households

Literature (Höjer, Sebba, and Luke 2013; Marsh 2016; Noble-Carr, Farnham, and Dean 2014) highlights personal development as one of the positive effects that fostering has on the biological children of fostering parents. Numerous studies (Duffy 2013; Höjer, Sebba, and Luke 2013; Noble-Carr, Farnham, and Dean 2014) have revealed that fostering has a positive impact on the communication and social skills of biological children. Similarly, biological children exhibit an increased self-esteem and display more empathy. Thompson and McPherson (2011) highlight positive experiences of biological children such as helping others, gaining self-confidence and having friends. What biological children found positive about fostering is their own growing in the understanding of problems of other children (Höjer, Sebba, and Luke 2013). Fostering helps biological children to gain considerable knowledge about human life and help them to learn about the misfortunes of others. Williams (2017) found that foster care has a positive impact on biological children. It made biological children compassionate, caring and non-judgemental. Findings from a study by Thompson and McPherson (2011) revealed that biological children felt that they learned a lot from fostering and they described themselves as more caring and sensitive people. They acquired skills and techniques from their parents on how to take care of foster children. Some of these children were involved in the caring role and they felt committed and significantly contributing to the lives of foster children. Noble-Carr, Farnham and Dean (2014) found that biological children developed warm relationships with foster children and referred to them as their brothers and sisters.

Negative Experiences of Biological Children Living with Foster Children in Their Homes

Biological children in foster-care families are faced with some unique challenges, for which they are seldom prepared. They are often forced to struggle silently and without proper support. Most children who have been removed from their homes and placed in foster care demonstrate extreme behavioural problems, including chronic patterns of aggressive or destructive behaviour (Leathers et al. 2012). Biological children have no voice to express their perceptions on foster-care placement (Williams 2016).

Behavioural difficulties such as stealing and aggressive behaviour that foster children sometimes display affect the relationship they have with the biological children of foster parents and can be very challenging to understand and to deal with (Leathers et al. 2012). According to Höjer, Sebba and Luke (2013), many biological children feel that their parents have little time for them and they even sometimes feel neglected by their own parents. Some of them find it challenging when social workers come to take out the fostered child for a “treat” and ignore them. Findings from Williams (2017) revealed that foster parents’ time and energy are mainly consumed by foster children’s needs so they end up not spending enough time with their own children. Njøs and Seim (2018) argue that biological children of foster parents experience a loss when foster children leave their homes because of the good relationships that they have with their foster siblings, as they regard them as their brothers and sisters. So, it becomes more difficult for them to cope with the loss of their foster siblings (Williams 2017).

The literature review shows that there is a paucity of literature on the biological children of foster parents, especially from the African perspective. Much attention is paid to the foster children and foster parents, ignoring an important component in the process of foster-care placement, which is the biological children component. This was the motivation for this study.

Research Area and Methods

The study was conducted in the Zwelitsha township, which is part of the Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. The Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality is surrounded by the Great Kei Local Municipality, the Amahlati Local Municipality, the Raymond Mhlaba Local Municipality and the Ngqushwa Local Municipality. Zwelitsha is bordered to the south-east by the long coastline of the Indian Ocean. The Township was created in 1947 as a corridor township in King William’s Town to provide labour for the Good Hope Textile Factory of the Da Gama Group. It has a population of 18 189 inhabitants, which is made up of 5 413 households (Stats SA 2011).

This paper is extracted from a study that was conducted in 2015 and 2016. A qualitative approach was employed because it allows the participants to express themselves fully about the phenomenon under study. The intention of this research was not to generalise findings but to gain insight (Creswell and Creswell 2017) into the fostering process and its effects on biological children. The population of the study is composed of all biological children of foster parents in the Zwelitsha township. Purposive sampling was used in the selection of the participants who were aged 10 to 18 years and who were going to school. The researchers obtained a list of all foster families from the Office of the Department of Social Development in Zwelitsha.

A semi-structured interview guide was developed and used as the primary instrument of data collection. The researchers conducted interviews with 30 biological children

in their family homes. The researchers had to translate English questions to isiXhosa so that all the participants could understand the questions. The interviews were audio recorded, with the full consent of the participants. At the same time the researchers took handwritten notes of the discussions. The questions were also rephrased, depending on the young person's age and ability to communicate.

Before data collection, the Ethics Committee at the University of Fort Hare approved the study and an ethical clearance certificate was obtained. Before conducting the interviews, participants were given further details of the study through consent and assent forms. Parental consent was obtained before interviewing the children. During the interviews, the participants were reminded that the information collected from them will not be shared with anyone who is not part of the study; it will only be used for academic purposes. In addition, their personal information will not be disclosed, so pseudonyms were provided for the purposes of anonymity as suggested by Kruger, Ndebele and Horn (2014).

Being a qualitative study, the data were analysed qualitatively. According to Flick (2013), qualitative analysis is the classification and interpretation of linguistic data to make statements about implicit and clear dimensions and structures of meaning making in the data and what is represented in the data. The recorded interviews were firstly transcribed and translated into English as they were recorded in isiXhosa. A thematic analysis was used and Braun and Clarke's (2006) steps to analyse data were followed. During the first step, the researchers familiarised themselves with the collected data. This was done by reading the data several times. In this stage, the researchers wrote down important ideas (initial codes). These codes were generalised from the sets of data and then organised into main themes. The main themes were then revised in relation to the extracts that were coded to create sub-themes. Lastly, the researchers redefined and named the themes. These themes were further linked to the existing literature and the aim of the study. Three main themes were identified, namely positive experiences of biological children about foster-care placement, ambivalent experiences of biological children regarding fostering, and negative experiences of biological children regarding foster care. The analysis was data driven because there is little knowledge about the experiences of biological children of foster parents in Africa.

Findings

We begin by presenting the biographical information of the participants followed by the three themes that emerged from the data. The themes include the positive, ambivalent and negative experiences. Each theme is further broken down into sub-themes.

Biographical Information of the Participants

Thirty biological children were interviewed and their ages ranged from 10 to 18 years. The majority (21) of these were female. Most of the participants were black South Africans, with only one mixed-race participant. All participants lived in the Zwelitsha township at the time of the study. All participating biological children had one or two parents or caregivers in their homes. The majority of the participants were in high school (Grades 8–12) while a few of them were still in primary school (Grades 4–7). Furthermore, six participants were also almost the same age as their foster siblings and eleven were older than their foster siblings. In addition, in each household, there were between one and four foster children. Most (24) biological children were related to their foster siblings as cousins and six of them were unrelated.

Positive Experiences of Biological Children about Foster-Care Placement

The findings highlight the first theme, the positive experiences of biological children regarding foster care. The data indicate that most participants were positive about foster-care placement. Two sub-themes of gaining new experiences and positive family relationships emanated from the theme of positive experiences.

Gained New Experiences

The findings revealed that most of the participants were optimistic about their foster-care experiences. They appreciated their parents, believed in them and felt that there were services that their parents were rendering to their foster siblings that brought personal development and contentment. The experiences of biological children regarding foster care were largely positive because they were satisfied with their living conditions and had positive relationships with their parents and foster siblings. They also indicated that they learned a lot from their parents; from caring for a child that is not biologically related to them to listening to everybody in the family to make good decisions. Some participants were older than their foster siblings. Two of the participants had foster siblings who were physically challenged in their households. Almost all the participants believed that they acquired new life experiences, such as knowing how children function, understanding their needs and knowing what was dangerous to them. Most of the participants were positive about having an additional duty in the family, which varied from washing, helping the foster child with school work, looking after children and other required tasks. An eighteen-year-old girl said:

I value the importance of family and permanency in a home for every child. Our values are often shaped from our experiences and I know that my passion to see a lonely child find a family forever is a value that was placed in me as a direct result of my fostering experience (biological child participant. (BCP 3)

Another participant said:

I've gained a lot from my parents; that we need to take care of each other even if we are not biologically related. (BCP 29, 16-year-old girl)

Positive Family Relationships

Throughout the interviews, most biological children maintained that they had positive and good relationships with their parents, even with foster-care placement. The participants did not feel threatened by the presence of foster children; rather they felt strongly bonded to either one or both parents. Most of the participants were satisfied and happy with the support, attention and responses received from their parents during the fostering period. Biological children believed that the arrival of foster children made their parents support them more in everything they were doing. They also believed that their families were more unified compared to the past and they took and treated their foster siblings as their own brothers and sisters. An eighteen-year-old girl indicated as follows:

I see my family through the eyes of love and I am grateful for every member of my family. (BCP 18)

This was echoed by another young participant. He reported that:

I love my siblings and I would feel very bad if they could be taken away from us because we are one united family. (BCP 11, 17-year-old boy)

Ambivalent Experiences of Biological Children Regarding Fostering

Another theme that emerged from the findings is that of ambivalent experiences, which can be defined as having or showing both good and bad feelings about something; the coexistence of conflicting and opposing thoughts or feelings (O'Reilly 2010). Two sub-themes emerged from the ambivalent experiences, which include uncertainty, independence and loss of parents' attention, and caring and resenting.

Uncertainty, Independence and Loss of Parents' Attention

A few participants indicated that their fostering experiences were indeterminate between helping children who were in need of care and protection and the consequences of it (fostering). Their feelings about fostering were mixed, which made them completely different from those who were positive, enjoying the presence of foster children in their homes, or those who were totally negative about the placement as a result of its challenges.

Some participants indicated that fostering was two-sided because through it they had learned to be independent and responsible at an early age owing to the responsibilities that fostering brought with it. Such responsibilities include babysitting, caring for foster children and also supporting the parents. The participants regarded these as being positive because they caused them to enhance their identity earlier in their development. At the same time, however, they felt that their parents no longer had time for them as they had to take care of the needs of the foster children. They felt that their parents no longer gave them the attention that they used to get before the foster children came to live with them. One of them reported that:

At the age of twelve, I was able to wash my younger foster siblings and made food for them especially when my mother was not at home. That on its own had a great impact in my life but I have noticed that my parents do not love me the way they used to. We used to go out for lunch when I did well at school but ever since she came and is living with us, we only go out when she performs well at school. (BCP 16, 16-year-old boy)

Caring and Resenting

The findings also revealed that biological children of foster parents experience both positive feelings of caring and negative feelings of resentment towards the foster children in their family. On the one hand, they show a lot of care and compassion for foster children who live in their homes. They were often concerned about the well-being of their foster siblings and through fostering they became caring and sensitive people. On the other hand, they developed feelings of hatred towards foster care because of the loss they experienced when foster children were leaving their homes. Some of them reported that they hated foster children for being unappreciative of what the foster parents had done for them, which is providing them with a home. In the words of an adolescent participant, biological children felt that:

Fostering is a very good thing because families provide homes for children who need homes and care but at the same time there are challenges that we face as foster families. When my foster sibling came and stayed with us, it was fine and we were all happy. I was happy because she was a sister and a friend to me. The problem started when she left us, she never communicated with us again and that angered me a lot because I felt like she was ungrateful for what my parents did for her. (BCP 17, 17-year-old boy)

Negative Experiences of Biological Children Regarding Foster Care

The findings also highlight the third theme, the negative experiences of biological children regarding foster care. The data indicate that a few participants were negative about foster-care placement. They never liked foster children in their homes and did not disclose any particular positive outcomes resulting from their fostering experience. Two

sub-themes emerged under this third theme, namely poor preparation before placement, and distraction of family balance.

Poor Preparation before Placement

It was found that all the participants had some knowledge about the need for the foster-care placement but were never informed of any implications of fostering. A few participants indicated that they were consulted by their parents about fostering even though they had already decided to take in a foster child. Biological children in kinship placement knew about problems that existed in their cousins' families, and they believed that their parents did not want to see children living in bad conditions in their own homes, whereas biological children who were not related to their foster siblings had no idea about foster children's situations. On the other hand, the participants reported that social workers never involved them (biological children) in any programme to prepare them for fostering. The participants also maintained that even when the foster children were leaving the foster home, social workers never provided any counselling to the biological children. A participant declared that:

My parents informed us about the decision of fostering they had taken and we never had any problem with that. (BCP 12, 13-year-old girl)

Two participants stated:

I do not remember any social worker sitting down with me and asking me how I felt about the fostering process. I was always under the understanding that they were there for the foster children and not for me. Even when they visited us as a family, they talked to my parents and my cousin, me and my siblings are always excluded. (BCP 15, 16-year-old girl)

At least if they have talked to us as about the fostering process, challenges that we might face along the way, it was going to be easy for us to talk to them about our experiences in foster care. (BCP 6, 17-year-old boy)

However, it is clear from the above response that while the parents informed their children of their decision, the children did not take part in the decision process.

Disruption of Family Balance

Some foster children believed that the arrival of foster children in their families disturbed their family's stability. The participants indicated that the parents no longer did things they used to do before the foster children came to stay with them and they had to accept and familiarise themselves with every change in the household, such as sharing a room with the foster child. The participants maintained that they, as biological children, experienced role and position loss associated with children who became part of their families. They also reported that they experienced a sincere sense of loss related

to their place and role in the family, especially concerning the relationship they had with their parents. A participant indicated:

When they [foster children] came here, I felt jealous because they were taking my mother away from me. That was how I felt ... no more just me and my mother. My mother and I used to go out and do stuff all the time ... now it was them too. (BCP 1, 11-year-old girl)

The findings also revealed that some participants felt it is necessary for them to take care of their foster siblings and this made them to be competent, confident and caring for others. This is because parents tend to be stricter towards their biological children while expecting them not to complain and be good role models to their foster siblings. Biological children felt that they were not treated in the same manner as their foster siblings; their parents were strict towards them and as a result this spoilt their relationship with their parents.

Discussion

Family diversity leads to many factors that affect the experiences of biological children. Based on the exposure of biological children to the lives of foster children, as well as the knowledge obtained from their parents, most participants in this study reported to have experienced new and beneficial perspectives. This is through growing up with foster siblings, which can be described as “eye-opening”. The belief by some of the participants that their parents were rendering services to foster children, which brought personal development and satisfaction echoes the findings of Höjer, Sebba and Luke (2013), who maintained that children who foster have increased self-confidence and display more empathy. As human beings, we need to empathise with those children who are unfortunate for one reason or the other; hence, the need to foster for the situation to be improved or to stabilise. Foster care brings with it many dynamics, some of which are pleasant as expressed by some participants who took part in this study. The learning of new ways of doing things, new values and stories of others is what diversity is all about. The sharing of experiences between the biological and foster children sometimes brings personal fulfilment and development, as indicated by Sutton and Stack (2013).

As indicated earlier in this paper, ambivalence is the simultaneous experience of positive and negative feelings about something (Tighe, Birditt, and Antonucci 2016). In this study, some participants expressed ambivalent or mixed feelings. While these participants learned to be responsible, they tended to see those fostered as their rivals and depriving them of the attention they were used to getting from their parents before the foster placement. As children who are still young, it is not surprising that the biological children experienced ambivalent feelings toward foster children in their homes. Many children want company and at the same time envy each other for competing for attention and sometimes resources as the findings of this study have shown. The findings corroborate those of Thompson and McPherson (2011) who reported that there

were participants in their study who felt that they had gained a lot from fostering and that made them responsible people. However, at the same time, there were feelings of hatred because of many reasons, including parents neglecting what they were doing for their biological children before the arrival of the foster children, not paying them much attention, and loss of contact with foster children when they were already bonded as a family. This is what Thompson and McPherson (2011) call changing relationships in the family, resulting from foster-care placement. Some of the areas of resentment by biological children that are similar to the findings of this study include loss due to fostering and also the stress and pressure that fostering has placed upon their parents (Nel 2014). In a similar vein, Williams (2017) revealed that most foster parents did not have time for their children as the needs of foster children consumed much of their time and energy. As noted by Minuchin (1974), the introduction of a new child in the family brings in a different set of family relations.

Studer (2014) reveals that through fostering, biological children are exposed to knowledge about foster children's pasts, such as different family values and histories of abuse and neglect. While these might attract empathy, they could also lead to negative feelings by the biological children towards foster children. These family values and histories show that families are unique systems with constantly changing dynamics. When people live in close relationships, they constantly affect each other (Collins, Jordan, and Coleman 2012). The negative experiences, as expressed by some of the participants, could also be because of poor management of the process of the foster-care placement. Children have rights that need to be respected. Therefore, parental decisions not involving children in the foster-care placement will obviously not augur well for the biological children who have the right of a home and the resources of their parents (Raineri and Calcaterra 2018). The role of social workers is very vital in the process as both biological children and foster parents are supposed to be educated regarding issues of foster-care placement such as expectations, challenges, and roles (Brown, Sebba, and Luke 2014; Van der Riet 2009). The lack of involvement of the biological children was reported by some of the participants and this was bound to create problems in the family stability and family living environment. Consequently, this usually leads to foster-care breakdown because there is no relationship between foster and biological children and also between social workers and biological children (Van der Riet 2009).

Recommendations

The findings of this study warrant some pertinent recommendations. First, foster parents should have an early and detailed discussion with their biological children before they decide to foster. It is important to prepare biological children for fostering, regardless of their age. It is also imperative for foster parents to discuss all the stages of foster-care placement, including how fostering will impact their biological children's lives, the roles they will play during foster care and possible ways to deal with challenges

that might emerge. In this way, there would be a peaceful coexistence. It is necessary for biological and foster children as well as foster parents to have frank and open discussions of challenges and/or behavioural problems coming from either side of the foster-care placement (biological or foster children). The discussions could indicate how these challenges or behaviours are impacting certain individuals in the foster placement decisions and how these could be solved or resolved to the satisfaction of all.

For biological children to receive proper support, they are encouraged to talk to social workers about their experiences and insights as this would enable them to have a better relationship with their parents and their foster siblings. Social workers and foster parents should support biological children in a way that will solve the problems that biological children are faced with in relation to foster care. Furthermore, before placing children in foster families, social workers should provide programmes such as counselling and psychosocial assessment of all members of the fostering family to see if they are fit enough and prepared to care for the foster child. Finally, when foster children leave a foster home, social workers should counsel the biological children so that they will be able to deal with the loss of their foster siblings.

Conclusion

This paper builds on the body of literature regarding the experiences of biological children of foster parents in Africa and South Africa in particular. Since the literature is sparse and focuses mainly on other aspects of foster care, there is still little that is known about the experiences of biological children of fostering parents. This study has shown the positive, negative and also ambivalent experiences biological children of foster parents go through. Inasmuch as biological children expressed positive experiences of foster-care children in their homes, it is not surprising that some of the participants had negative and ambivalent experiences. This seems to point to the failure of the foster-care process in certain areas. Parents and social workers could be blamed for this failure owing to the non-involvement of biological children in the process and their input in the final decision of foster-care placement. Also, the lack of open discussions of behavioural and other challenging issues during foster-care placement could lead to negative feelings from biological children, which could also negatively affect the foster children. This could lead to a chain reaction, with various consequences. Therefore, if social workers and foster parents could work with biological children, foster-care placement could be a positive experience to everyone who is part of it.

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