



University of Fort Hare  
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**THE EXPERIENCES OF ADOLESCENTS PREPARING TO LEAVE FOSTER CARE  
ON THE GROUNDS OF AGE IN EAST LONDON**

**By**

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## DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, Tarisai Mugove Kadungure hereby declare that the work contained in this dissertation is my own, except where due acknowledgement is made with full references in the text and that it has not previously been submitted to any university or institution of higher learning for any qualification or certificate.

Signed .....

Date .....

## **DEDICATION**

This study is especially dedicated to my mother, Mabel Kadungure, who has always been a constant source of strength in my life, and to my late father, Ignatious Canaan Kadungure, who instilled a spirit of hard work into our family.

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## **ABSTRACT**

Adolescents in the process of leaving foster care often have personal histories characterized by instability and one or more related factors such as poor parenting, separation from their families, poverty, abuse, neglect, abandonment, personal loss and disruptions resulting from displacement. As a result, these adolescents are often unprepared to be released from the support provided by government institutions. As few studies have investigated the experiences of children in foster care in South Africa, the principal aim of this study was to investigate the experiences of adolescents leaving the foster care system in East London, South Africa when they reach the age requiring them to do so. The qualitative method was adopted for this study, and thirty-five in-depth interviews were conducted. The study found that for children in foster care the adolescent stage is the most crucial. It was also learned that the foster care process itself is long, arduous and complex. The adolescents experience stress and uncertainty and are not given any support from the government or social workers as they approach the age at which they will be required to leave foster care. It is recommended that support be extended at least until after secondary schooling has been completed and the adolescents are able to fend for themselves.

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## ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AIDS	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
CDG	Care Dependency Grant
CYCC	Child and Youth Care Centre
CSG	Child Support Grant
HIV	Human Immune Virus
NWSSDF	National Welfare Social Services & Development Forum
UN	United Nations
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
SASSA	South Africa Social Security Agency

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

#### **1.1. Introduction**

This chapter presents the general orientation of the study. It provides the background and highlights the initial motivation for conducting the study. The research problem, the aims and objectives and the questions which the study seeks to answer are also stated here. This chapter also demonstrates how the research is important to society and to those involved in caring for the adolescents who are preparing to leave foster care on account of their age. The outline of the ensuing chapters is also presented here.

#### **1.2 Background of the study**

Approximately 500,000 children in South Africa reside in foster care today (Hall, 2010). The demand for foster care as substitute care has increased in South Africa, notably during the past decade (SASSA, 2011). The rising numbers of children in foster care means that there are also increasing numbers of adolescents leaving the foster care system owing to age and beginning to lead an independent life away from the foster care system. This concurs with the findings of Bass, Shields and Behrman (2004:14), who maintain that children who enter foster care systems at over the age of 12 years are “much more likely to simply age out of the system” (sic) rather than to leave foster care as a result of either adoption or being reunited with their families. Of those who leave when required by age to do so, the majority fail to succeed in attaining and living an independent life. This failure is usually attributable to complex histories of abuse,

neglect, multiple placements, lack of social and economic resources and the obvious fact that many originally come from families whose lives are characterised by and associated with risks such as poverty, drug abuse, violence, HIV and AIDS and crime (Bass, Shields & Behrman, 2004).

South Africa has inherited a legacy of violence, extreme inequality and social dislocation from the apartheid regime, whose expression for a large portion of the population has taken the form of high levels of domestic violence, substance abuse, sexual abuse and neglect. In addition, the country is carrying the greatest HIV burden in the world, with over 5.7 million people currently infected. There are estimated to be 3.7 million orphans in South Africa, approximately half of whom have lost one or both parents to AIDS (UNICEF, 2011). When children are orphaned, when they are abused and neglected, or when problems such as drug addiction, mental illness and incarceration cause parents to be unable to provide adequate care for them, the state is obliged to intervene to take care of these children, and very often this means that they enter the foster care system.

If foster children constitute a population at risk, then adolescents preparing to leave the system as they approach the age at which they are required to do so may be even more at risk. Foster adolescents face enormous challenges and are much more likely than their age-mates in the rest of society to experience great hardships, including a lack of support once they have been emancipated from the foster care system, homelessness, involvement in criminal activities, failing to continue with education and unemployment (Atkinson, 2008:183). This study seeks to investigate the perceptions and experiences

of adolescents in South Africa as they prepare to leave foster care, not of their own free will, but rather in accordance with the laid down age limit.

### **1.3 Statement of the problem**

The adolescent stage of life has been characterised as being stressful and filled with uncertainty. It is a time when young adults are said to need more help from their parents and various support systems than at most other stages of their young lives (Furstenberg, Rumbaut, & Settersten 2005). However, adolescents who have traumatic pasts and face abnormally great challenges and obliged by age to leave foster care, are compelled to go through this difficult transitional stage of life with limited or no family support and few resources (Collins, 2001). The Children's Act 38 of 2005 emphasises the need to provide safety and protection to children and appears to be progressive and aware of the unique and specific needs of children but it fails to take into account the needs of adolescents during the period in which they are obliged, by age, to prepare to leave the foster care system. .

### **1.4 Aims and Objectives**

The principal aim of the study is to investigate the perceptions and experiences of adolescents preparing to leave the foster care system on the grounds of age in the East London Metropolis. In order to achieve this, the following specific objectives were formulated:

- To examine the perceptions of adolescents in foster care of the process of leaving the system as a result of reaching the age that makes it mandatory for them to do so.

- To understand the perceptions of adolescents in foster care regarding the positive and negative aspects of leaving the system upon reaching the age for them to do so.
- To investigate the role of designated social workers working with adolescents who are obliged to prepare to leave foster care on the grounds of age.
- To contribute to the available literature concerning the experiences and perceptions of adolescences preparing to leave foster care on the grounds of age

### **1.5 Research Questions**

The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- How do adolescents in foster care perceive the process of preparing to leave on the grounds of age?
- What do adolescents in foster care consider beneficial and what do they feel to be challenging about preparing to leave on the grounds of age?
- What do designated social workers provide by way of preparation and support for adolescents preparing to leave foster care on the grounds of age?

### **1.6 Significance of the study**

Internationally, it is widely acknowledged that there is a great need for support for adolescents in foster care when age makes it mandatory for them to leave this care and

the protection that it provides. This study should be of importance to the future of foster care in South Africa, as it contributes to the literature of the foster care system. In South Africa there is a great need for research which provides a deeper understanding of the transition made by adolescents leaving foster care. The inclusion of the voices of adolescents in foster care in this study should help to guide the process of making the transition out of foster care and in the formulation of policy, in order to provide effective services to older adolescents. Accordingly, this study should be of use to practitioners guiding adolescents out of foster care.

The researcher knows of no literature in South Africa which documents the experiences of adolescents preparing to leave foster care when required to do so by age. By contrast, there have been many studies made by researchers in various countries, including the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Canada, Sweden, Germany and Belgium. The researcher does acknowledge, however, that there may be documented, but unpublished, reports in the social services and social development departments of the government and in the tertiary institutions of South Africa, although these may not be readily available to many in social services fields. The study should therefore be able to provide significant insights to academics, students of social work and other practitioners working with children, regarding the developmental transitions which adolescents face as they approach the time when they are required to leave foster care. This study could, in fact, provide a useful starting point for reforming and improving foster care procedures and policies.

## **1.7 Chapter Outline**

### **Chapter 1: General Overview of the Study**

This introductory chapter introduces the topic and presents the background of the research. The aims and objectives of the research and the research questions, which the study seeks to answer, are also outlined in this chapter. The significance of this study was also highlighted in Chapter one.

### **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

This chapter reviews the existing literature on the subject of adolescents being required to leave foster care on the grounds of age, both worldwide and specifically in South Africa. Particular emphasis will be given to the support which adolescents preparing to leave foster care receive from child protection organizations. The legislative and theoretical frameworks will also be covered in this chapter.

### **Chapter 3: Research Methodology**

This chapter details the research methodology, the research approach and research design, sampling techniques, methods of collecting data, the validity and reliability of the research instruments used and the ethical considerations pertaining to this study.

### **Chapter 4: Presentation of Findings and Analysis of Data**

This chapter presents the qualitative results of the research and the qualitative analysis of the data obtained from the participants.

## **Chapter 5: Summary of Findings, Conclusions and Recommendations**

This chapter contains a summary of the findings and the conclusions drawn from the study. It also offers recommendations and relates the implications of the findings for social work practice. The limitations encountered during the research process are also stressed.

### **1.8. Conclusion**

The great increase in the numbers of children being placed in foster care in South Africa makes it obvious that research in this field is needed. At present, there are very few studies focusing on these children who are placed in foster care, and specifically on adolescents who are approaching the age at which they are required to leave the system. These adolescents are often faced with greater challenges than their counterparts in the outside world, owing to their complex experiences of loss, neglect and displacement, and on leaving foster care, they are subjected simultaneously to two sets of stressful transitions, namely, having to leave the care, protection and supervision which they had been given by social workers and foster parents for the independence and responsibility of adulthood, and secondly, making the transition from childhood to adulthood, which is often difficult, even for children brought up in normal circumstances.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to review the existing literature on foster care and, specifically, the literature devoted to the period when children placed in foster care are approaching the age at which they are required to leave the system. The chapter begins with the theoretical framework underpinning the study, and goes on to look at both regional and global trends for foster care and support systems. The nature and context of foster care in South Africa are detailed, as are the laws pertaining to foster care, the challenges faced in South Africa by foster care and the adolescents who are required to leave it, and the role purportedly played by social workers to help and support these adolescents during this time of great uncertainty.

#### **2.2. Theoretical Framework**

In the attempt to understand the experiences of children preparing to leave foster care, this study made use of two theories: the Ecological Theory of Bronfenbrenner (1979) and the Psychosocial Theory of Human Development of Erikson (1968).

##### **2.2.1 The Ecological Theory of Bronfenbrenner (1979)**

The Ecological Theory uses ecological concepts from biology as a metaphor with which to describe the reciprocity between people and their environments (Sands, 2001). It

places emphasis on the individual and the interrelationships with his or her environment. These interrelationships exist between the individual and others in particular geographic and socially constructive environments or systems, including the individual, groups, families, the community, institutions, class and policies (Gitterman, 1999). Exchanges between an individual person and the environment can be positive, negative or neutral. When exchanges are positive, the environment produces resources and experiences at the right time, and in the right form, to ensure the individual's cognitive, emotional, biological and social development and functioning. When exchanges are negative, the individual's development and functioning may be impaired and the environment may be damaged (Germain and Gitterman, 1996).

Constructionists maintain that the meanings which we attach to past events shape our present and our future. The stories that adolescents in foster care tell are likely to reflect those events in their lives which they experience as most meaningful. According to Whiting and Lee (2003), the descriptions of their experiences, given by adolescents in foster care, are important for several reasons, which include:

- (i) A present lack of understanding of how adolescents experience foster care.
- (ii) Having a clear picture of foster children's experiences could increase awareness of their situation and result in improved policies governing foster care.
- (iii) Most children want to talk about their experiences (Whiting and Lee, 2003).

To gain a better understanding of adolescents in foster care and their preparation for independent living, as they prepare to leave foster care, all of the interdependent systems need to be examined, including the individual person's cognitive, biological, psychological, emotional, social development and functioning. Adolescents approaching

the age at which they are required to leave foster care can be thought of as individual systems which work interdependently with other systems in their environment, including the biological family, the foster family, friends, the community and social workers. Understanding how adolescents preparing to leave foster care navigate, using their own perspectives, the interacting systems in which they are involved may provide useful information about their experiences of life and the challenges which they face. These perspectives and experiences reflect a critical awareness of the diverse and complex relationships between individual people and a particular place, and draw attention to the ways in which individuals shape, and are shaped, by the social contexts in which they are embedded. Studies have found that many former foster children are among the most socially excluded groups of young adults in society (Stein, 2006).

### **2.2.2 The Psychosocial Theory of Human Development of Erikson (1968)**

Complementing the Ecological Theory, Erikson's theory of human development (1968) maintains that adolescence is the time in which individuals begin to develop their identities, their capacity to develop and maintain intimate relationships and adult role responsibilities. Fidelity is the particular strength that emerges during adolescence and is closely linked to infantile trust and mature faith. However, adolescents leaving foster care often face conditions in their social environments which hinder their adult development. When children experience abnormal childhoods, characterised by abuse and neglect, their search for identity and emerging fidelity often become confused and, perhaps, compromised to the point of becoming confused about the role assigned to them by society and tending to deviate from society's accepted norms (Muller, 2002). In addition, adolescents leaving foster care are thought to be at an increased

developmental risk owing to the fact that, in most cases, they are on their own sooner than their peers who have not been in foster care (Collins et al, 2001). Understanding these aspects of adolescent development and the factors which influence the transition from adolescence to adulthood is important in a study such as this, which aims to investigate the experiences of adolescents during the time in which they are preparing to leave foster care.

### **2.3. Foster care around the world**

Globally and regionally there are differing contexts for foster care. These contexts will be examined, paying particular attention to the various legislations pertaining to foster care, the age at which children are required to leave foster care in the various countries whose systems are investigated, the experiences of children in foster care and the types of interventions which are implemented for these children in the various countries. Case studies of the experiences of adolescents preparing to leave foster care in these countries will be examined. To begin, there will be a brief generic discussion of the experiences of children leaving foster care on the grounds of age and the challenges which they face.

Children in foster care often lack the crucial foundation provided by the support given by a family and the relationships they need in order to achieve emotional security and to enter adulthood, with all the responsibilities that it entails. Upon entering the foster care system, they are often confronted with conflicts of loyalty, feelings of guilt for disclosing abuse or neglect and feelings of abandonment (Dore & Eisner, 1993). Once in foster care, they often lose their privacy and may be separated from one or more siblings.

Contact with their parents is restricted to laid down times and, in some cases, supervised, and they may be cut off from the friends they had before, social networks, communities to which they may have belonged, groups, religious groups and so on. In a great many cases in modern society, young people do not become self-sufficient adults until well after attaining the age of 18 years. They often depend upon their families for emotional and financial support until they have sufficient education, or training, in order to obtain sufficiently remunerative employment to enable them to support themselves and, later, to establish their own homes and families. Preparing to become an adult is an incremental process which begins in childhood and continues into the teenage years and beyond. Young people usually acquire the knowledge and skills needed to manage money and to make independent decisions, keenly aware of the safety net provided by their families. As they move into adulthood, in a great many cases their families continue to provide emotional, social and material support.

The enduring interdependent relationships existing within the context of a family give the individual child his, or her, first sense of self and identity. (Collins, 2001). If this assessment is accepted, it has grave implications for the lot of adolescents preparing to leave foster care once required by age to do so. As has already been noted, these adolescents tend to have complex, and often traumatic, histories which have led to their being placed in foster care. As a result, they may often have great difficulty finding appropriate support systems to guide and help them through the process of leaving foster care.

Foster care takes many forms around the world. In North America, Australia and Western Europe, foster care is often a widely used option for the placement of children requiring alternative care. (Rosstat and UNICEF,2010). The legislation governing this type of foster care takes into account all the issues pertaining to child development, and there are provisions made for adolescents in foster care and those who are in the process of preparing to leave, when required by age to do so. Elsewhere in the world, formal foster care is given to a relatively small proportion of the children living without parental care. In much of Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia formal foster care is used in a piecemeal manner only, in that it is only nominally recognised and preference is still given to traditional informal foster care. In Central and Eastern Europe, the Commonwealth of Independent States and some parts of Latin America, foster care programs are still in the process of being developed and only a relatively small proportion of the children in alternative care benefits from them at present. In Japan, only 10% of the children in alternative care are in foster care and in Russia the figure is only 8%. (Rosstat and UNICEF,2010).

In 2005, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reported that 24,407 foster children left foster care through “emancipation.” These children, who had been removed from their families and communities, in most cases owing to allegations of maltreatment or behavioural problems, left foster care by virtue of their age, and not because they had achieved a specific permanent resolution of the problems which had seen them being placed in foster care, such as being reunited with their families, being adopted, or placed under guardianship. Many adolescents who leave foster care on the grounds of age return to live with their original families. If the circumstances of these families have

not changed, however, it is unlikely that they would be prepared or able to provide the support which adolescents need in order to make the transition to adulthood successfully.

In America in 1992, Downs conducted a study of children leaving foster care which was based on attachment theory. The study focused, over a period of two and a half years, on the interaction between fostered adolescents and the members of their foster families, in 23 placements which had been made for a limited period of time. The study found that many of the adolescents had difficulties in accepting help or committing themselves to close relationships, often owing to difficulties experienced in the past, including feelings of being rejected by their birth families. They tended to become either highly dependent upon others or else highly independent, often keeping those who are most important to them at arm's length. Most of the adolescents found forming attachments difficult, owing to their complex histories and previous placements.

According to Sinclair et al. (2005), a strong attachment between an adolescent leaving foster care and an adult usually has beneficial results for the adolescent in terms of emotional stability and developing the means to cope with present circumstances. (Sinclair et al 2005). The majority of adolescents in foster care will inevitably have histories characterised by stress and trauma. Stressful experiences during childhood have been found to have grave consequences for the developing brain during late adolescence and emerging adulthood, primarily as a result of changes in brain structure during this period. Chronic stress has been found to have adverse effects on learning, memory and executive functioning, and has been implicated in fear conditioning, which

is among the most basic mechanisms by which individuals learn about the emotional significance of sensory stimuli (Watts-English et al., 2006).

Legislation in the U.S.A. has made provisions to increase funding to state and local child welfare, to support programs which help adolescents leaving the foster care system on the grounds of age. "Independent living" programs have been established in America to help young adults to overcome the difficulties which they face when they leave foster care. Through these programs, young people leaving foster care receive several types of assistance, including help to complete education and to find employment, instruction in the basic skills needed to live on their own, such as money management, hygiene, house keeping and nutrition, and supervised living arrangements, such as renting an apartment of their own or with others, while continuing to receive assistance from a child welfare worker. The U.S. federal government has made independent living funds available to states to enable them to provide various types of assistance to children leaving foster care, as a means of preparing them to assume adult responsibilities. At the outset, this initiative targeted adolescents between the ages of 16 and 18 years. In addition, the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 provides financial support to enable states to provide young people between 18 and 21 years of age, who have left foster care, with independent living assistance, which includes room and board and medical care.

In a study of 48 former foster care children, conducted in England by Saunders & Broad in 1997, it was found that more than a third of the total sample had harmed themselves deliberately since the age of 15 or 16 years, either by self-inflicted injuries, overdosing,

burning themselves, or a combination of two or more of these. Nearly two thirds of the young people had contemplated taking their own lives, and 40% had tried to do so when they were between the ages of 15 and 18 years, at the time when they were leaving foster care (Stein & Dumaret, 2011). However, England has clear legislation regarding the support given to children leaving foster care on the grounds of age. The legal framework for children in foster care is provided by the Children Act of 1989, as amended by the Children and Young Persons Act of 2008 .This framework seeks to support children in foster care, between the ages of 16 and 18 years, in order to prepare each young person for the time when they will no longer be in foster care (Stein & Dumaret, 2011).

The Children Leaving Care Act 2000 was introduced in England and Wales in October 2001 (Stein, 2008). The main aims of the Act are to:

- Delay young people's transitions from foster care until they are prepared and ready to leave.
- Strengthen the assessment, preparation and planning for leaving care, and provide better support for young people after they have left care.
- Improve the financial arrangements for care leavers and be responsible for assisting young people until they are at least 21, or 24 years of age, if they are in approved programs of education or training.

The Children and Young Persons Act of 2008, which is currently being implemented, contains new legal provisions. These new provisions include consulting the children in foster care before moving them out of care in order to prevent their being made to leave before they are ready, the right to a personal advisor and the obligation for local

authorities to provide a bursary for higher education. It is evident that, in England, the legal frameworks providing for the welfare of children have been well thought out and place a great deal of emphasis on the need to support children leaving foster care.

In 2008 more than 280,000 young people in France benefited from child welfare services. These included educational assistance and support for their families or placing them in foster care, which 12 to 15% of the children were in the process of preparing to leave during the course of the year (DRESS, 2008). Since 1975, support has been provided to children up to the age of turning 18 while they are in foster care, and to children with inadequate support from their families or extended families. This support is given following an assessment of each individual case and is reviewed every six months until the young person reaches the age of 21 years. These children are provided with a personal allowance to help with their education or job training. They are allowed to continue staying with their foster families, but most of them have their own accommodation (Stein & Dumaret, 2011).

In France, legislation and arrangements for supporting children and adolescents in foster care have evolved over time. Various support systems have been developed by communities, private foundations and local authorities, particularly for young people from poor socio-economic backgrounds, between the ages of 16 and 25 years. New interventions are also currently being proposed in order to cater better for the needs of families and to support adolescents preparing to leave foster care and making the transition to adulthood. A national directive the Haut Commissariat à la jeunesse was introduced in 2009, to prevent the fragmentation of support services and to co-ordinate

practices supporting children during the transition to adulthood (Stein & Dumaret, 2011). A study in France of 14 to 20 year-old adolescents in foster care at the Protection Judiciaire de la Jeunesse identified a pattern of multiple, chronic and severe health problems. The findings were succinctly summarised by Stein & Dumaret (2011:4) as follows:

*“Boys mostly had scars from accidents, and the girls’ problems were centered on their bodies (tattoos, body piercing, scarring). The study found that compared with their peers, higher depression symptoms were noted (11% vs. 7%), and higher rates of declared suicide attempts (mostly among the girls, 17% vs. 9%); they were slightly less likely to report that they were in good health, they were twice as likely to have premature sexual experiences, and their hospitalisation rates (30%) were significantly higher. Furthermore, they were more likely to have committed or been subjected to violence: 6% of the boys and 41% of the girls had been sexually assaulted (2% and 19% had been raped, respectively); regular or daily use of psychoactive substances were more common (particularly marijuana and alcohol for girls)”* (Stein & Dumaret, 2011:4).

In Asia, foster care is developing slowly, as a result of increasing interest in coping with the large numbers of children in need of alternative care, and growing concerns regarding residential care (World Vision, 2009). In Latin America and the Caribbean, there is still work in progress regarding foster care and, consequently, not much can be deduced from the literature concerning adolescents leaving foster care. There are a great many children living without parental care in the region, owing to the reliance on residential care. Countries such as Chile, Brazil, Paraguay, Argentina, Guatemala, Peru

and Costa Rica have responded to this by developing foster care programs. Brazil is also making efforts to improve policy regarding alternative care and has made a national plan for family and community-based care, focusing on deinstitutionalization and a commitment to increase preventative work and alternative care options.

The history of foster care in the region of Sub-Saharan Africa centres, to a large extent, on the fact that the burden of foster care has traditionally been the responsibility of relatives and family members. However, the AIDS pandemic has placed enormous strain on this support system, and the problems of debilitating poverty in the region result in ever-increasing numbers of children being orphaned and needing care. This situation has prompted governments to try to find ways to take care of these children, and countries in the region have been developing legislation to deal with the problem of children who are in need of care, and programs to support children leaving care are also being developed. South Africa, Namibia and Botswana have all formulated legislation to provide foster care, however, the manpower (e.g social workers) required to give effect to the legislation is growing at a slow pace (DSD, 2004).

In Sudan, the Save the Children initiative developed a foster care program in the refugee camps which is based on traditional child-rearing practices. The children who could not be reunited with their parents or wider extended families were encouraged to identify families in the camps with whom they would like to live. Once agreement had been reached with the family, a small hut in which the child would live would be built next to the family home. The family would supervise, monitor and guide the child, providing discipline when it was needed, with the child often sharing meals and

attending cultural gatherings with the family. This practice reflects the one which was common for older children in Sudan, namely, the building of homes alongside those of their parents (World Vision, 2009).

It is quite clear that America, France and England all have ample legislation supporting children in foster care and adolescents preparing to leave the system, and that much thought has been given to providing adequate support to those leaving foster care. This finding would certainly indicate that there is a great need for a study such as this one in South Africa. As has been noted, adolescents leaving foster care will inevitably have experienced a great deal of psychological stress and trauma. Accordingly, they are far more likely than their peers who are not in foster care to suffer from problems related to both physical and mental health and, as a consequence, to attain far lower educational qualifications, which would, in turn, deprive them of achieving the level of developmental maturity needed to make a successful transition to adult life. It is not surprising, therefore, that adolescents leaving foster care, with their histories of abuse and neglect, and who are not provided with assistance to make the transition to independent living, are at a far greater risk of experiencing confusion regarding their identity and place in society and to struggle to cope successfully with its conventions.

## **2.4 Foster care in South Africa**

This chapter introduced the subject of foster care as a global phenomenon, in order to set the stage for a more focused discussion of foster care in South Africa. The term “foster care” will be discussed and defined in the context of, and for the purposes of, this

research. The legislative framework governing foster care in South Africa will be discussed briefly, and the challenges facing the foster care system will be outlined. The preparation for the process of leaving foster care on the grounds of age and the role played by social workers in this process will be covered, and the chapter will be concluded with a discussion of the challenges faced by children in foster care.

#### **2.4.1 Defining Foster care**

Foster care is the chief option for alternative care for children in South Africa. It is a service extended to those children who are unable to remain with their families, owing to abuse, neglect, the death of parents and the temporary inability of the family to take care of its children ( Meintjes, Budlender, Giese & Johnson 2003).

The term "foster care" is an umbrella term which covers a wide variety of situations in which a child, whose own family is unable to provide the care normally given to children, is cared for in substitute family care for a planned period. The Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children (UN 2009) define foster care as:

*“Situations where children are placed by a competent authority for the purpose of alternative care in the domestic environment of a family, other than the children’s own family, that has been selected, qualified, approved and supervised for providing such care”* (UN 2009).

It should be noted though, that the definition of foster care provided in the UN Guidelines is by no means universally accepted around the world. Foster care is defined in various ways around the world, making it difficult to compare the various systems of foster care. In countries such as the United States of America and Australia, foster care

is a generic term which includes agency group homes, formal kinship care and family foster care (Downs, Costin & McFadden 1996: 297 - 311). By contrast, group homes in South Africa are classified as Child and Youth Care Centres (CYCC). The children placed in these centres are not regarded as being in foster care in South Africa. However, there is a common element in all the definitions of foster care, which, in one form or another, conveys the idea of caring for children in a family environment and that the rights of parents and certain parental responsibilities are not transferred to the providers of foster care. It is often difficult to distinguish foster care from other forms of family-type care in a mutually exclusive sense. For example, a particular type of placement may be referred to as foster care, guardianship, a family-type home or kinship care, depending on the country in which the placement is made.

It is clear that it is necessary to define the context in which the term "foster care" is used, in order to avoid any possible confusion. For the purposes of this research, foster care is defined as the placement of a child in the care of a person who is not the parent or guardian of the child, either through an order of the Children's Court or a transfer in terms of Section 171 of the Children's Act, 2005. This excludes care of a child in a Child and Youth Care Centre or in temporary safe care. The Children's Court may place a child with a person not related to the child, with a relative who is not a parent or guardian of the child, or in a registered cluster foster care scheme.

#### **2.4.2 The legislative context of foster care in South Africa**

South Africa has developed one of the most progressive legislative frameworks for the care and protection of children. The Children's Act (Act No. 38) of 2005) replaced the

Child Care Act (Act No. 74) of 1983 after the regulations had been finalised on April 1, 2010. The Children's Act (Act No. 38) of 2005 was established in order to give effect to the full constitutional rights of children, which include family care or appropriate alternative care, protection from maltreatment, neglect, abuse or degradation, and to provide care and protection to children who are in need of it (South Africa, 2006). Accordingly, this legislation guides the foster care process in an endeavour to:

- Protect and nurture children by providing a safe, healthy environment which supports them in all their needs.
- Promote the goals of permanency planning, first towards family reunification, or by connecting children to other safe and nurturing family relationships intended to last a lifetime.
- Respect the individual and the family by demonstrating a respect for cultural, ethnic and community diversity.

In most instances, a case for foster care is reported to the nearest departmental office, child and family welfare organisation or child protection organisation. In order for a child to be placed in foster care the following procedure is then usually followed:

- a) A social worker investigates the matter.
- b) A report is prepared for the Children's Court.
- c) The Commissioner of Child Welfare declares the child to be in need of care and protection.

According to Section 150(1) of the Children's Act (Act No. 38) of 2005, a child is in need of care and protection if the child:

- has been abandoned or orphaned and is without any visible means of support.
- displays behaviour which cannot be controlled by the parent or care-giver.
- lives or works on the streets or begs for a living.
- is addicted to a dependence-producing substance and is without any support to obtain treatment for such dependency.
- has been exploited, or lives in circumstances which expose the child to exploitation.
- lives in, or is exposed to, circumstances which may seriously harm the child's physical, mental or social well-being.
- may be at risk if returned to the custody of the parent, guardian or care-giver of the child when there is reason to believe that he or she will live in, or be exposed to, circumstances which may seriously harm the physical, mental or social well-being of the child.
- is in a state of physical or mental neglect.
- is being maltreated, abused, deliberately neglected or degraded by a parent, a care-giver, a person who has parental responsibilities and rights, a family member of the child, or by a person under whose control the child is.

Once a child has been found by the courts to be in need of care and protection, according to any one of these criteria, the child is removed and placed in foster care. Section 182(2) of the Children's Amendment Act (Act 41) of 2007 stipulates that for someone to become a foster parent, that person must be screened by a social worker. The screening process is done in order to determine whether the prospective foster parent is a fit and proper person, who can be entrusted with the responsibility to provide foster care and is suitable to work with children in terms of the Child Protection Register.

This register contains a list of all known perpetrators of child abuse. A person whose name is on the list would be prohibited, by law, from working in an institution which provides welfare services to children. Working in these institutions in any capacity whatsoever would be forbidden, regardless of whether or not the person in question would come into direct contact with children. The screening also ascertains the willingness and ability of the applicant to undertake exercise and maintain the responsibilities which accompany foster parenting, and whether he or she has the capacity to provide an environment that is conducive to the child's growth and development.

The foster parent is then eligible in terms of the Social Assistance Act of 2004 to apply for a Foster Child Grant, which is disbursed monthly per fostered child. In addition, the foster parent is recognised as the temporary legal custodian of the child. At present, placements in foster care are made for a maximum period of two years at a time, with constant monitoring by social workers being required, and a renewal process being necessary to continue the placement and receipt of the foster care grant (South Africa 2006).

#### **2.4.3. The nature and context of foster care in South Africa**

There are more than 3 million orphaned children in South Africa. The rate of parents dying and leaving behind orphaned children is greatly influenced by the prevalence of HIV and AIDS in South Africa. Orphaned children automatically qualify for foster care. As a consequence, communities in South Africa carry the heavy burden of a great many children requiring foster care, resulting from both the HIV and AIDS pandemic and the

fact that there are many children who are abused and neglected, mainly owing to the inability of their parents to take care of them, a phenomenon itself influenced by the ever-prevalent grinding poverty. The Department of Social Development has taken the step of advocating foster care as a means of caring for the increasing numbers of AIDS orphans.

The main contribution made by the government to foster care is financial, in the form of the Foster Child Grant. Section 71(6) of the Children's Act (Act 38/2005) states that foster parents have the right to financial assistance to support the foster child or children in their care (South Africa, 2006). In the national budget for the financial year 2009/2010 in South Africa, the Foster Child Grant was set at R780.00 per month per foster child. Increasing numbers of families are beginning to rely on grants for financial support, and the Foster Child Grant has particular appeal for these families, as it is almost three times the amount of the Child Support Grant.

There are other types of grants available to assist with the supporting of children, such as the Child Support Grant (CSG) and the Care Dependency Grant. The CSG was introduced in April of 1998 and its ambit has since been expanded, quite dramatically, as an important initiative for social assistance and an equally important strategy towards the eradication of poverty. Applicants for the grant are required to pass a means test. At present, an amount of R280.00 per child qualifying for the grant is paid to the primary caregiver per month. The Care Dependency Grant (CDG) is given to the primary caregivers of children who are severely disabled to the extent that they need full-time care. A professional report from a doctor or a psychologist is usually required as proof,

to confirm that the child on whose behalf the grant is requested is, in fact, disabled. If there is no-one who is able to take care of the child in the family home, the need for the child to be institutionalised arises. The grant is available for children between the ages of one year and 18 years.

There is always a danger that the foster care grants could be seen as a means of alleviating poverty in a family, rather than one for providing support and protection to children. Meintjies and Van Niekerk (2005:2) are of the opinion that impoverished parents could see, in the Foster Child Grant, a reason to place their children in the care of others, and feel that this perception could have adverse consequences for the foster care system in South Africa.

## **2.5 Challenges facing the foster care system in South Africa**

Apart from the challenges faced by foster care systems the world over, such as caring for children with behavioural problems and the recruitment of suitable foster parents, some of the challenges facing the foster care system in South Africa are unique and peculiar to the realities of contemporary South Africa.

### **2.5.1 Lack of human resources**

South Africa lacks the human resources needed to implement the stipulations of the Children's Act. It has been estimated that 66 000 social workers and R44 billion are needed to implement the new Children's Act successfully, but there is a great shortage of the social workers needed to bring the full implementation of the Children's Act 38/2005 to fruition (Theron, 2010). The shortage of social workers constitutes a huge

obstacle for the foster care system of South Africa (Magome, 2008). Owing to the great shortage of social workers, those social workers working in the foster care system, at present, are overburdened with enormous caseloads (Naidoo & Kasiram, 2006:119).

Since 2008, the South African Government has instituted a campaign of offering bursaries to students to encourage them to become social workers in an attempt to remedy the present situation. However, as is often the case when a campaign is launched with a goal needing to be attained with great urgency, there is the possibility of rushing the process in order to make up numbers, without paying much attention to the quality of the social workers being produced. The former minister of Social Development, Zola Zkweyiya, identified the shortage of magistrates who have been trained as Commissioners of Child Welfare and the shortage of dedicated Children's Courts as additional obstacles preventing the successful implementation of an effective foster care system (Magome, 2008). The shortage of social workers also tends to result in a general ignorance of the importance of developing the social services provided by social workers, particularly where the vulnerable group of adolescents leaving foster care on the grounds of age is concerned.

### **2.5.2 Families**

It is widely believed, in South Africa and all over the world, that a family provides the best possible environment for children to grow up in. Legislation in South Africa supports this view by making placement in foster care the first option for alternative care (Perumal & Kasiram, 2008:259). While the White Paper for Social Welfare (Department of Welfare, 1997) describes the family situation as ideal, it also provides insights into the

realities of family life in South Africa, and it is clear that families face many difficulties, in the form of problems both within the family and outside of it. Among the chief problems afflicting families from within are those of communication and relationships, marital conflicts, a lack of preparation for marriage, divorce, remarriage, parenting problems, family violence, a lack of support networks involving the extended family and the greater community, and the ultimate breaking down of relationships within the family and the break-up of families. Complementing these destructive factors which are at work within families are violence and unsafe conditions in the outside community. Owing to the combined effects of these pressures, many families are unable to cohere sufficiently for the family members to fulfil their various parenting and supporting roles (Department of Welfare, 1997:60).

For foster care and child welfare, the chief objectives are successful placement of children and, ultimately, family reunification. As has already been noted, a successful placement can be difficult to achieve, while a successful reunification is possible only if the relationship between the biological parents, the siblings and the child can be maintained during the time in which the child is in foster care. Another potential cause of problems for the foster care system involves the foster families themselves. The relationships within foster families are rarely perfectly harmonious, and, as a result, foster children are likely to be removed from a dysfunctional family and be placed in another one which has problems of its own ( Perumal & Kasiram, 2008:259).

### **2.5.3 The great number of foster care cases**

Yet another challenge for the foster care system comes in the form of the ever-escalating numbers of children requiring foster care. According to the Annual Report of the Department of Social Development 2000-2001, in the year 2000, foster care grants were received by foster parents for 49 843 foster children, but ,by 2008, there were 500 000 children in foster care in South Africa (The Centre for Child Law, 2008). According to Meintjies and Van Niekerk (2005:2), this disproportionate increase is, to a large extent, owing to the HIV/AIDS pandemic and to a greater awareness of foster care among the general population. Orphans and abandoned children qualify as children who are in need of care and are eligible for foster placements. The vast numbers of foster care cases places great strain on the child protection system in South Africa, making it difficult for it to fulfil its obligations to those children who are abused and neglected and also in need of its services, apart from those who are at the stage where they are preparing to leave foster care on the grounds of age (Meintjies & Van Niekerk, 2005: 2).

The legal system cannot cope with all the applications for foster care placements, and owing to the huge number of applications, social workers have no time for any work other than the processing of applications for foster care through the children's courts and attending to the awarding of foster care grants (NWSSDF, 2007:2). In very few cases do children placed in foster care receive any further assistance from social workers, and consequently, very little attention is given to adolescents in the vulnerable position of preparing to leave foster care when required by age to do so (NWSSDF, 2007:2). The challenges facing the South African foster care system are numerous, and

their consequences are far-reaching, particularly where these adolescents are concerned.

## **2.6 Leaving foster care in South Africa**

According to the Children's Act (Act No 38) of 2005 (2006: section 180), children in foster care must be discharged from care at the age of 18 years, unless an application for extension of care is submitted and granted. An application for the extension of placement in alternative care, in order to enable a child to complete his or her education or training, is permissible according to section 176 of the Children's Act (Act No 38) of 2005 Act .The application must be accompanied by:

*(a) a letter from the present alternative care-giver to the effect that the care-giver is willing and able to care for the child concerned.*

*(b) a letter from the head of the education or training facility indicating that the child has the capability to complete his or her education or training and has a satisfactory attendance record.*

*(c) a certified copy of the child's identity document or birth certificate.*

In the cases where a child, turning 18 in foster care, has completed his or her high school education, the extension cannot be granted, and the child is required to leave foster care. Requiring adolescents to leave foster care when they reach the age of 18 years means that many of them find themselves without a safety net, when they leave the security and protection of the environment which foster care had provided them. Studies evaluating the post-foster care functioning of foster adolescents provide convincing evidence to suggest that most adolescents who leave the foster care

system, when required to do so at the age of 18 years, simply cannot make it on their own (Courtney et al., 2005).

For many adolescents who grow up in foster care and for whom the government is financially responsible, the transition to adulthood can be sudden and painful. These foster children lack long-term stable relationships with parents or mentors who are able to provide the necessary orientation and guidance to enable them to learn how to assume adult responsibilities. For these adolescents, the government has been their legal guardian. When they reach 18 years of age and the state's legal responsibility towards them ends, many struggle to adjust to their sudden independence and loss of support.

### **2.7 The role of social workers during the process of preparing to leave foster care**

Prior to entering foster care, the adolescents preparing to leave would have had many traumatic and unsettling experiences. Many would have come from low-income homes and communities, and many would have also been exposed to family members with problems of drug or alcohol abuse, domestic violence, the incarceration of a parent and so on (Taussig, 2002). Some of these children would have been subjected to neglect, physical, sexual or emotional abuse, or have suffered from the death of a parent, and in many cases from abandonment, resulting in their being removed from their family homes. Support from a social worker can prove to be vital in the lives of these adolescents, whether it comes in the form of general encouragement, practical support, help with emotional problems or solving more complex problems.

Thomas (2005:118) maintains that a good working relationship with a social worker is usually an essential component of successful fostering, and summarises the responsibilities of a social worker as follows: *“the worker to whom the child is assigned serves as the nucleus...the medium for surveillance and for assessment of the on going life situation...and is responsible for working with each of the individuals involved...also responsible for arranging supplementary services, and integrating them”*. Usually social workers and foster parents will negotiate together to decide upon the specific expectations which are to be met, and to clarify the roles which each will play, and the tasks which each will perform (Whitelaw, Downs, Moore, McFadden, Michaud and Costin, 2004:345).

From the researcher's own experience as a social worker, it is very apparent that a social worker needs to be sensitive to the needs of the adolescents, in order to understand their problems and to be able to provide them with practical advice to help them to deal with them. According to the Children's Act (Act No 38) of 2005, a social worker plays the central role in providing support to a child in foster care. The social worker makes a comprehensive investigation of the individual child's case, compiles a report and monitors the child's progress, while he or she is in foster care. The duties of the social worker, where a child in foster care is concerned, make him or her an integral part of the child's life while in foster care, and need to include even more support to the child as the crisis point at which the child will be required to leave foster care approaches. The report on a child in need of care, written by the social worker, should include recommendations to assist the child's family, and also an assessment of the therapeutic, educational, cultural, linguistic, developmental, socio-economic and

spiritual needs of the child. It is important for contact between the child and his or her family to be maintained throughout the foster care period.

Maintaining contact helps the child and the parents to confront the reasons for the child being unable to live at home. It helps the child to form a realistic perception of his or her family and prevents the parents becoming idealised. Contact with the family can help to curb the development of anxieties in the child and provide reassurance that the time in foster care is temporary, and that he, or she, has not been forgotten, or abandoned, by the parents. When the child who is preparing to leave foster care is relatively free from anxieties, he or she is able to focus on improving his or her relationships with the foster family, and will be able to develop mentally and emotionally as a result (Blacher 1994: 143).

However, the experience of the researcher, as a social worker, indicates quite clearly that there is often a marked tendency for contact between children in foster care and their own families to decline substantially, after two years of the child being placed in foster care. It appears that social workers often become progressively less enthusiastic in their encouragement of parents to maintain contact with their children in foster care, and that the longer they remain in foster care, the less likely they are to return home, making it very difficult for them when they are required by law to leave foster care.

## **2.8 Challenges faced by adolescents leaving foster care in South Africa**

There is no literature at present which documents the challenges faced by adolescents preparing to leave foster care on the grounds of age in South Africa. This study aims to

fill this gap in the literature. It is noted, however, that insights may be gained from studies conducted in other parts of the world, and that the conclusions drawn by these studies may prove useful.

These studies have shown that development, during the years of emerging adulthood, is inextricably linked to relationships within the family into which a child is born, and that these relationships influence the developmental trajectories and changes which occur in adulthood (Arnett & Tanner, 2006; Cooney & Kurz, 1996). Adolescents preparing to leave foster care in South Africa are likely to experience difficulties while making the transition to adulthood, owing to the fact that, in their case, the family unit is under threat and unable to play its crucial roles in providing nurturing, care and protection to its children. The grim legacy of apartheid, with its well-documented policies, which caused the fragmentation of families and communities, has certainly contributed to the plight of these families, as have the failed efforts, to date, to lift economically marginalised communities out of poverty (Green paper on families, South Africa, 2011).

It is the conclusion of the researcher that adolescents leaving foster care in South Africa may not have a family, to which they are able to turn, for material assistance and emotional support, in order to negotiate the path to economic self-sufficiency. If adolescents not in foster care were faced with the realities facing those preparing to leave foster care, such as the immediate cessation of support from their families and the expectation of their becoming immediately self-sufficient, it could reasonably be anticipated that a large proportion of them would need to turn to the government for assistance. This would not necessarily be the result of these adolescents being

incapable of becoming self-sufficient, but rather because the age at which they were expected to do so was too young, and they had not yet developed the knowledge and skills required to cope with the realities of adult life.

When children who have had traumatic experiences are removed from their families, they lose their only base of operations for the explorations of emerging adulthood, both literally, as residents in a parental household, with financial and material support coming from their parents, and figuratively, in that parents and relatives are often the most reliable and authoritative sources of wisdom and guidance for young people. Perumal and Kasiram (2008:161) maintain that reuniting families is often difficult in the South African context, owing to the fact that, in a great many cases, biological families are in the process of disintegrating, owing to factors such as migrant labour, divorce, teenage pregnancies, infertility, children being abandoned, HIV and AIDS and death. As a result, a great many adolescents leave foster care without any real prospect of being reunited with their families and, possibly, without even knowing where the members of their families are.

Studies in America have shown that there is a high risk of social exclusion for children leaving foster care, and that they constitute one of the most excluded groups of young people in society. Many experience a multiplicity of problems, both while they are in foster care, often resulting from feelings of being stigmatised, especially at school, and after they reach the age requiring them to leave foster care (Courtney, et al 2001). These adolescents have an increased risk of social exclusion, owing to the social conditions in which they live and their complex, and often compromised, past histories.

Even though they may be able to show the same level of cognitive ability as adults while making decisions, they may make unwise decisions because they are more likely than adults to be affected by psychological factors, such as emotions of the moment and the desire to be accepted by peers. (Courtney et al. , 2001).

Evidence suggests that adolescents leaving foster care experience difficulty maintaining balanced, cognitive emotional coherence, especially when emotions are strongly aroused, such as when security and survival are threatened (Arnett & Tanner, 2006). In South Africa there is no legislation to support children once they have reached the age which requires them to leave foster care, and as a consequence, it is very likely that these adolescents will experience great difficulties in terms of both personal insecurity and managing to survive in a world which suddenly offers them no support or comfort. The findings of studies by Greenberg, et al (2001) suggest that adolescents leaving foster care continue to be easily swayed by their emotions, which distort their thinking in self-serving and self-protective ways. Despite the shortage of literature concerning the challenges facing adolescents leaving foster care on the grounds of age in South Africa, the extensive research conducted worldwide provides insights which are likely to have some bearing on the various challenges which adolescents leaving foster care are likely to encounter, but this does not remove the need for a study such as this one, with its specific focus on South Africa.

## **2.9 Conclusion**

A broad overview of how foster care is effected internationally, followed by how it is effected in South Africa has been presented in this chapter. Internationally, there is an effort made towards providing services to adolescents who are obliged to leave foster care due to their age. However, the same cannot be said about South Africa. The fact that there has been little analysis of, or literature, documenting the experiences and perceptions of adolescents leaving foster care in South Africa, provided an important motivation for this study. This chapter further outlined the challenges experienced during adolescence as well as the challenges faced by social workers in dealing with adolescents who are preparing to leave care due to their age.

## CHAPTER THREE

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1. Introduction

A research methodology is best described as a method by means of which information is collected, for the sole purpose of answering research questions (Krauss, 2005). Welman and Kruger (2001:9) maintain that research methodology assists in the discovery of the scientific truth, or reality, of a given phenomenon, by using scientific methods. Accordingly, the methodology chosen must be appropriate to the nature of the phenomenon which forms the focus of the study.

As was indicated in chapter one, the aim of this study is to investigate the experiences of adolescents who are in the process of preparing to leave foster care in East London, on the grounds of age. Accordingly, this chapter will provide a detailed description of the area in which the study was conducted, and outline the methodological framework employed to carry out the fieldwork. The research design will be detailed, as will the approach adopted for the study. The population for the study will be specified, as will the sample selected and the sampling technique employed. In addition, the instruments used for the collection of data will be identified, as will the limitations of the study. This chapter also evaluates the dependability and trustworthiness of the results of the research, and explains how the data was analysed. The ethical issues to be considered when conducting research are discussed at the end of the chapter.

### 3.1 Description of the area in which the study was conducted

The area in which the study was conducted is the city of East London, which is located in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. The Eastern Cape is the second largest province, and East London is the sixth largest city in South Africa (Buffalo City Municipality, 2013). Below is a photographic presentation of the East London area.

**Figure 1. Map of East London**



Source: Google Maps (2013)

As is the case for any metropolitan city in South Africa, East London faces great challenges arising from a shortage of housing, crime among the youth and general poverty. However, East London is also remarkable in that it includes Mdantsane, one of the largest township communities in South Africa, and in terms of size, second only to Soweto, which brings great diversity and complexity to the population of East London. In terms of demographics, it is estimated that a quarter of the overall population is between the ages of 10 and 19 years. According to the Buffalo City Municipality (2013), it is estimated that a third of the population living in the East London area is unemployed, and that more than 70% of the population earns less than R1500.00 per month, which is pegged as the subsistence level for households in South Africa. These figures give a clear indication that the greater portion of the population in East London lives in conditions of dire poverty, with the inevitable consequence of many children roaming unsupervised in the streets, as a result of either poverty or being in a child-headed family.

It is estimated that approximately one fifth of the population in East London lives in informal housing areas, with only 18% of this population being able to save any surplus, after deducting monthly expenses from their earnings (Buffalo City Municipality, 2013). This situation places enormous strain on the foster care system, particularly where adolescents preparing to leave foster care on the grounds of age and to forfeit the support which they had received from the government, or from foster parents, are concerned.

### **3.2. Research Paradigm: The Interpretivist Paradigm**

A paradigm is a belief system, or a theory, which guides the manner in which research is conducted. According to Taylor, Kermode, and Roberts (2007:5), a paradigm is “a broad view or a perspective of something”. In addition, Weaver and Olson’s (2006:460) definition of a paradigm indicates how research could be affected and guided by adopting a particular paradigm by saying, “paradigms are patterns of beliefs and practices that regulate inquiry within a discipline by providing lenses, frames and processes through which investigation is accomplished”. Accordingly, in order to clarify how the researcher structured his inquiry and methodological choices, the paradigm adopted for this study will be discussed before commencing a discussion of the specific methodologies adopted for this study.

This study made use of the interpretive paradigm, which supports the view that there are many truths and realities. The interpretive approach was very significant for the social sciences, as it challenged the dominance of the positivists, who aimed to arrive at abstract models of human behaviour and experience, through measurement and sorting (Broom, 2005). The interpretive approach enabled the social sciences to move away from positivist and deterministic approaches towards a new method of constructing meanings, which was based on a constructivist ontological position. According to Bryman (2004:264), a constructivist ontological view holds “that reality is in fact constructed rather than ‘set in stone’ or objectively measurable, and furthermore, that individuals construct their reality by associating ‘meaning’ with certain events or actions” (Bryman,2004). This type of paradigm focuses on the holistic perspective of the person and the environment, which makes it more congruent with the experiences of children

preparing to leave foster care than a positivist paradigm (Weaver and Olson, 2006). In addition, the interpretive paradigm is associated with methodological approaches, which provide an opportunity for the voices of the participants in the research to be heard, as they explain their concerns and practices in their own words, which resonates very well with the aim of this study, which is to investigate the experiences of children preparing to leave foster care on the grounds of age.

Owing to the nature of the research in this study, with its emphasis on the experiences of the adolescents, the researcher felt that the qualitative methodology associated with the interpretive paradigm offered the best means of obtaining the subjective information in its raw form, in order to analyse the data obtained in a scientific manner, while at the same time recognising the complex psychosocial and emotional factors which influence the experiences of adolescents, as they prepare to leave the secure and nurturing environment which foster care had provided. The next sections will elaborate on, and describe in detail, how the interpretive paradigm and qualitative methodology were applied in this study.

### **3.3. Research design**

A research design is a plan or a blueprint for conducting research (Babbie and Mouton (2001). Accordingly, research design can also refer to the plan, or structural framework, by means of which the researcher intends to conduct the research, in order to obtain the answers to the research questions. The ways in which research can be conducted are many, and a researcher can choose between employing quantitative or qualitative

research methodologies. As has been noted, this study made use of the qualitative approach, with its emphasis on qualitative methods of investigation and presenting the results in a descriptive manner. According to Babbie (2005:89), exploratory research is conducted in order to familiarise the researcher with a topic or a subject which is relatively new, with the aim of yielding new insights into the field of interest.

Using a qualitative research method involves an exploration of the issues in a particular field of enquiry and the understanding the phenomenon being investigated. The qualitative methodological approach enables the researcher to observe social life in its natural setting, to understand it in this realistic context and also to understand the meanings which the people who constitute the focus of the study attach to their lives and experiences (Fouché and Delport 2002:79).

Surveys, observations, case studies and interviews are all used to obtain qualitative information. Quantitative research focuses on gathering numerical data and generalising it across groups of people. The reason for using the quantitative method in research is to quantify data and generalise the results from a sample to the population of interest. This study does not seek to quantify the data obtained, but rather to use it to gain an understanding of the experiences of the participants, and accordingly, a quantitative approach would not be inappropriate for this study. Instead, the researcher concluded that a qualitative approach, aiming to investigate, describe and understand the experiences of adolescents preparing to leave foster care was a suitable point of departure. In the next section, essential attributes of qualitative research, identified by Fouché and Delport (2002), are linked with the specific aims of this study:

- *Qualitative Research allows a holistic perspective.* Qualitative research assumes that the whole phenomenon is being investigated in the study. In this study, the researcher aims to gain comprehensive and in-depth information first-hand from the participants, in order to develop a profound understanding of the experiences of the adolescents participating in the study.
- *Qualitative research is descriptive.* Qualitative research focuses on describing phenomena, in order to understand them. In the case of this study, the description includes a detailed account of the context in which the study is conducted, the participants and the procedures followed. This study made use of qualitative research methods because they allow the researcher to probe for information which the participants might not readily disclose in other contexts or circumstances. The experiences of the adolescents in foster care are complex and have far-reaching emotional consequences for them, and it is quite apparent to the researcher that mere numbers or statistics could not provide an adequate representation of the information obtained. Many of these children have traumatic and devastating histories, leading up to their being placed in foster care. An all-inclusive and sympathetic method of enquiry was needed to answer the research questions in a manner which would make the research useful and provide a solid basis for future studies. Accordingly, the views of participants needed to be expressed in the form of verbatim quotations to include their emotions and their feelings in their recorded responses.

- *Qualitative research is interested in how people make sense of their lives, how they interpret their experiences and how they structure their social world. A qualitative approach assumes that each participant brings his or her own interpretations and values to the research process. This study focused its attention on individuals and their experiences in foster care. A qualitative approach allowed the researcher to be flexible in the research process, and not having to adhere rigidly to a strictly laid down set of research procedures. Instead, the uniqueness of each interview could be acknowledged by using different questions to guide the overall process (Fouché and Delport 2002:81).*

A descriptive strategy was used, with the aim of describing the actual experiences and perspectives of the adolescents preparing to leave the foster care system, which reflected the meanings and interpretations which they gave to their experiences, and in so doing presented the researcher with a more complete description of their social reality.

This section is followed by sections detailing the target population, the population sample and sampling techniques, the instruments for collecting data, the analysis of data and ethical considerations.

### **3.3.1 Population**

The population of a study refers to the total number of the specific elements in the field of the study or the “...*large pool of cases or elements...*” with which the research problem is concerned (Babbie 2005:196), or the large pool of cases or elements which

constitutes the main focus of a scientific query. A research population can also be regarded as a well-defined collection of individuals or objects known to have similar characteristics. All individuals or objects within a particular population usually have a common binding characteristic or trait. In most cases, the description of the population, and that of the common binding characteristic of its members, is the same. In this specific study, the common binding characteristic is foster care, and the description of the population is defined in the context of foster care.

The population of this specific research is made up of one group comprising all adolescents between the ages 16 and 18 years in the foster care system of East London, South Africa, and a second group comprising all the social workers rendering foster care services to adolescents in East London. These two groups proved to be very suitable for this study, in that they allowed the researcher to glean valuable information concerning their experiences directly from the adolescents themselves, which was, in turn, complemented by more objective information from the professional people who had been in direct contact with these adolescents over a long period.

### **3.3.2 Sample and sampling strategy**

According to Neuman (2006:219), a sample is a smaller set of cases which a researcher selects from a larger pool and generalises to the greater population. The sampling frame is the list from which the potential respondents are drawn. Researchers usually choose to work with a representative sample of the population, rather than the population as a whole, owing to the constraints imposed by concerns such as time, money and the amount of work required to cover a larger population. In some instances,

it may be practicable for a researcher to sample an entire population. Examples would include:

- When the population is very small.
- When extensive resources are available.
- When a very high response is not anticipated.

In general, two types of sampling are employed in social science research, probability and non-probability sampling. With probability sampling, all the elements (e.g., persons, households) in the population have the same probability of being included in the sample, and the mathematical probability that any one of them will be selected can be calculated. By contrast, when non-probability sampling is employed, the elements of the population are selected on the basis of their availability, for example, when they volunteer to participate, or because, in the researcher's personal judgment, they are representative of the greater population in terms of the criteria being investigated in the research (Neuman,2006).

Castillo (2009) defines probability sampling as a sampling technique in which the elements are gathered in a process which gives all of the individual elements in the population an equal chance of being selected. This is achieved by using one of several randomising techniques. The advantage of using a random sample is that it makes for the absence of both systematic and sampling biases. There are various types of random sampling:

- Simple random sampling
- Stratified random sampling
- Systematic random sampling

- Cluster random sampling
- Mixed or multi-stage random sampling

As opposed to probability sampling, non-probability sampling is a sampling technique in which the elements are gathered in a process which does not give all the individuals in the population an equal chance of being selected. Subjects in a non-probability sample are usually selected on the basis of their accessibility or through the purposive personal judgment of the researcher. Most researchers are limited by constraints such as time, money and manpower and, consequently, it is often almost impossible to sample the entire population randomly, which necessitates employing another sampling technique, namely non-probability sampling (Castillo, 2009).

In this study, samples were selected by means of purposive non-probability sampling. This sampling technique makes it possible for the researcher to select those participants who have in-depth information concerning the research topic and who are willing to share it. Purposive sampling is based on the judgment of the researcher that a sample has typical elements which contain the most typical attributes of the population as a whole (DeVos et.al, 2005). Gubrium and Holstein (2002) maintain that purposive sampling is the most important type of non-probability sampling, because it enables researchers to rely on their experience, ingenuity and previous research findings in order to obtain participants to make up a sample which may be regarded as representative of the greater population where the phenomenon on, or phenomena, which constitute the focus of the study are concerned.

The purposive sampling technique used in this study enabled the researcher to select respondents who were actually experiencing all the feelings and emotions that accompany preparing to leave foster care when required by age to do so, and also those who were providing these children with care and support.

The sample was selected from a non-government organisation, Child Welfare South Africa in East London. The first group comprised adolescents preparing to leave foster care on the grounds of age. Thirty adolescents between the ages of sixteen and eighteen years participated in the study. Child Welfare South Africa in East London was selected by the researcher owing to the fact that it is the largest non-government organisation in the East London metropolitan area offering foster care services, and to the fact that the researcher has worked for the organisation and is familiar with its procedures.

For the second group, comprising the five social workers who participated in the study, the researcher used purposive non-probability sampling, owing to the fact they are the only five staff members at Child Welfare South Africa in East London rendering foster care services. The register of adolescents between the ages of sixteen and eighteen years who had been placed in foster care between April 2010 and April 2012 under the Children's Act (Act No 38) of 2005 was used as the sampling frame, because the Act came into effect in April 2010. The main aim of the researcher was to obtain as much in-depth information as possible from the participants. According to Sheafor & Horejsi (2006:614), the number of participants in the study should have been sufficient to

validate its results and findings, as they maintain that a sample comprising 5 to 10 participants is deemed to be sufficiently large for a qualitative study.

### **3.3.3 Instruments used to collect data**

This study used interviews as an instrument for collecting data. According to Greeff (2002:292), the interview is one of the research instruments which is most often used to collect data in qualitative research. Mouton (2001:289) points out that in qualitative research the interviewer makes use of a general plan of enquiry, rather than a specific set of questions. In this study an interview schedule, which was guided by semi-structured interview themes to collect data from the participants, was used. The interview questions were structured to focus on particular themes, to enable participants to give a full account of their experiences. The interviews were one-on-one. The interviews were conducted with both the adolescents preparing to leave foster care and the social workers providing support in the form of foster care services to these children. Interviews are appropriate for this type of study because they enable the researcher to understand the world of the participants and to learn a great deal about their individual experiences.

In this study, the researcher was particularly interested in obtaining first-hand information from the participants concerning their experiences and the meanings which they attached to them. Before collecting data from each participant, the researcher scheduled the date and time of each interview with the individual participant concerned, and due consideration was given to privacy, confidentiality and conducting the interviews in a non-judgmental atmosphere (Cournoyer and Klein 2000). The researcher

asked the foster parents of the participants for permission to conduct the interviews, and the children also gave their consent to be interviewed. The interviews were conducted in two phases, the first comprising the interviews with the five social workers working in foster care at Child Welfare South Africa in East London. The second phase comprised the interviews with the adolescents who were preparing to leave foster care. The researcher informed all of the participants that participation in the study was completely voluntary and that all participants would be allowed to withdraw at any time.

The interviews were recorded on a tape recorder and transcribed later on. Recordings were made in order to obtain the most complete record possible of what had been said. Permission to record was sought prior to the interview. In order to accommodate all of the participants, the interviews were conducted in English. The researcher used words which were easy for the participants to understand and avoided the use of ambiguous terms, in order to allow the interviews to flow smoothly. The researcher made use of prompts to guide the interviews, in order to obtain the desired in-depth understanding of the experiences of the participants and the meanings which they attached to them.

All of the respondents were very co-operative and eager to provide relevant information throughout the interviews. The openness and honesty shown by the respondents during the interviews was very beneficial to the study, and was no doubt motivated by the letters of introduction from the University of Fort Hare and the fact that the researcher introduced himself personally, explaining the purpose of the interviews. The interviews with the social workers took place at Child Welfare South Africa in East London, and those with the children preparing to leave foster care took place at their homes. The

average duration for each interview was 20 minutes. In general, the interviews proceeded smoothly, save for a few distractions which were caused by people coming into the room while the interviews were in progress. The interviews with children preparing to leave foster care were needed to be conducted outside their homes because the houses either did not have sufficient space to spare for the interviews, or else they were occupied at the time.

### **3.4 Analysis of data**

According to De Vos (2002:339), the analysis of data is the process of bringing order, structure and meaning to the mass of data collected. Analysis of the data started at the research site and continued throughout the period of the study. The researcher made use of thematic analysis of content to analyse the data, according to the themes and patterns which emerged while the data was being collected. To bring order, structure and ultimately meaning to the data, the transcripts were reduced by summarising and categorising, in order to identify important aspects of the phenomenon being researched

The summarising and categorising of the data began soon after the researcher had made the transcripts and listened carefully to the taped responses of the participants, in order to identify the themes or issues which emerged from the interviews. This process involved picking up words, phrases and ideas used by the participants to express themselves directly from the text. The themes identified were then integrated in order to consolidate the research data.

### 3.5. Ethical considerations

Every professional researcher has the obligation to observe research ethics. According to De Vos et al. (2005), ethics comprise a set of moral rules which are set by individuals or groups and are widely accepted. They provide rules of conduct and guidelines for behaviour in all spheres of life. The researcher recognised that a great deal of sensitivity needed to be exercised when asking questions about the personal lives of the respondents, and accordingly, a great deal of attention was paid to this important consideration while collecting the research data (Babbie, 2005). Permission had been obtained from the foster parents before the interviews with the adolescents preparing to leave foster care were conducted. The constitution of South Africa regards persons under the age of 18 years as minors, and consequently, personal information, or any material that may be regarded as revealing or incriminating, may not be published. For the purposes of this study the following ethical considerations were recognised and respected:

- *The obligation to have legal authority to conduct a research study.* Legal authority was obtained from the Board of Management of Child Welfare South Africa in East London. Ethical clearance was sought from the University of Fort Hare to carry out the study.
- *The obligation to inform participants of the nature of the study.* The participants were given sufficient information to enable them to have a reasonably good understanding of the field of research in which the study was being conducted, of the consequences of participating in the research project, and of the purpose of the research. The participants and the parents of the children in foster care were informed regarding the source of the funding of the research.

- *Informed consent.* As a general rule, research projects which involve human participants, such as this one, can be commenced only after securing the free and informed consent of the participants, who have the right to withdraw from the study at any time, without their doing so entailing any negative consequences for them. The participants were informed that their participation was completely voluntary. Informed consent was obtained from the foster parents of the children participating in the study. The consent of the adolescents in foster care to participate in the study, and for the interviews to be recorded, was sought. Both the organisation and the participants were issued with a written explanation in which all the information relevant to the study was provided, including:
  - (a) How the findings of the study may be used.
  - (b) What may be expected while participating in the study.
  - (c) The undertaking of confidentiality.
  - (d) The option to cease participating at any point during the interviews.
- *Confidentiality.* Participants are entitled to a guarantee that all information which they provide concerning their private lives will be treated confidentially. Researchers are obliged to prevent the use and dissemination of information which could harm individual research subjects. It is standard research procedure for research material to be presented in such a manner that the participants remain anonymous, and there are strict ethical requirements regarding how lists of names, or other information, which would make it possible for individual participants to be identified, are either stored securely, or destroyed. According to Babbie (2005:64), anonymity guarantees that no-one is able to “*identify a given response with a given respondent.*” In this study the researcher guaranteed

anonymity by transcribing the interviews personally and by replacing the identities of the participants with pseudonyms. While the information may have a name attached to it, the researcher is obliged to keep it secret from the public. The researcher ensured confidentiality and anonymity by adhering to the following measures:

(a) By recording only personal information which was needed for the purposes of the study.

(b) By storing all of the information in a safe place.

(c) By removing all particulars concerning the identities of the individual participants, after completing the coding procedure.(De Vos,2011)

- *Respect of privacy*= The researcher showed due respect for the privacy of the participants. Participants are entitled to be able to check whether confidential information concerning them is accessible to others. Respect for privacy aims to protect individuals from unwanted interference and exposure. This applies not only to emotional issues, but also to questions which involve sickness and health, political and religious opinions and sexual orientation. The researcher was aware that the participants might volunteer sensitive information concerning their experiences while in foster care, and that this information would need to be safeguarded. The researcher was also aware that the interviews could cause emotional or psychological distress to the participants and, accordingly, the researcher conducted the interviews in a sensitive manner. An open invitation was given to the participants to join debriefing sessions after the interviews, should they wish to do so.

The research was carried out by a registered social worker who submits to the ethical

code of the Council of Social Service Professions, and he was completely aware of the ethical considerations pertaining to a study of this sort.

### **3.6 Dependability and Trustworthiness**

In order to establish the dependability of the results of the study, the procedures followed need to be reported in detail, thereby enabling a future researcher to repeat the work, if not necessarily to obtain the same results (Guba and Lincoln, 2001). In order to ensure the dependability of the study, the researcher described, in detail, the methodology used, outlining, in equal detail, the research design and how it was applied in the study, noting also the exact duration of each interview, and the problems encountered while conducting the study.

In qualitative research, the concept of validity has been adapted to include more appropriate terms, such as quality, rigour and trustworthiness (Stenbacka 2001; Seale 1999). To improve the validity of the study, both of the interview schedules used were constructed to focus on relevant and important thematic areas. Prompts were then used to ensure that important concerns in the study were not omitted from the responses of the participants. It is the researcher's considered opinion that the results obtained in this study are credible, trustworthy.

### **3.7. Conclusion**

In this chapter, efforts were made to authenticate the methodology adopted in the study, as it laid the foundations for conducting the research. It also created the starting point for the analysis and the interpretation of the data by the researcher. The qualitative research approach used in this study was appropriate, in that it assisted the researcher

to investigate the research topic in a flexible manner, with the intention of obtaining specific data from the respondents. This chapter would signify very little if it were not married to the next chapter, in which the data is presented and analysed.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **ANALYSIS OF DATA AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter will focus on the presentation and interpretation of the findings of the study. Thirty adolescents and five social workers participated in this study. The principal aim of the study was to investigate the experiences of adolescents preparing to leave the foster care system in East London. In order to obtain in-depth information from all of the participants, individual, face-to-face interviews were employed. This chapter is divided into two sections: the first comprises the findings from the interviews conducted with the adolescents preparing to leave foster care, and the second comprises the findings from those conducted with the social workers.

The researcher made use of themes to present the findings of the study. Each theme is complemented by a discussion of the responses provided by the participants. Questions posed during the interviews centred on the following five main themes: understanding of foster care, leaving foster care on the grounds of age, support received during this period, the families into which the adolescents preparing to leave foster care had been born and the termination of foster care. Sub-themes which emerged from the interviews will be included under each main theme. The purpose for having these central themes for this study was to gain an understanding of the perceptions of adolescents, in the process of preparing to leave foster care, and to try to understand what these adolescents feel to be positive, and what they feel to be negative, about being required to leave foster care on the grounds of age. It was also imperative to understand,

precisely, the role of the social workers appointed to guide these adolescents through leaving foster care in order to take their place in the world outside.

**4.2. Findings from interviews with adolescents preparing to leave foster care**

In order to obtain all-inclusive data concerning the experiences of adolescents preparing to leave foster care, the researcher conducted face-to-face interviews, which enabled the researcher to obtain in-depth, first-hand, raw data from the children themselves. Recent studies (Roberts, 2000; Messiou, 2003; Davie and Galloway, 1996) have stressed the importance of giving children a voice, and the need to listen to what they say, and how they say it. These researchers endeavored to obtain the views of the children themselves, rather than to rely on secondhand accounts from others. In this research, not only is it acknowledged that it is important to listen to children to hear what they have to say, but it is also acknowledged that there is much to be gained from entering the child’s world and encountering reality as they apprehend it. The following details were gathered and tabulated concerning the adolescents preparing to leave foster care who participated in the study:

**Table 1. Details of adolescents preparing to leave foster care on the grounds of age**

<i>Number of Females</i>	<i>Number of Males</i>	<i>Average Age</i>	<i>Average Grade in School</i>	<i>Average Number of Years in Foster Care</i>
19	11	17 years	Grade 11	14 years

The information, gathered from the in-depth interviews, has been presented in terms of the themes and the sub-themes derived from the interview schedule used to collect data. The first theme aimed to find out whether the adolescents preparing to leave foster care had an accurate understanding of what foster care actually entails. The following sub-themes emerged:

- Period in foster care.
- Meaning of foster care
- Reasons for being placed in foster care.
- Foster care should be extended until after secondary education has been completed.

#### **4.2.1 Period in foster care**

The interviews were conducted with thirty adolescents who were preparing to leave foster care. The participants were asked to say how long they had been in foster care. Twenty-two of the interviewees indicated that they had been in foster care for more than twelve years, and the remaining eight indicated that, for them, the period in foster care had been less than five years. Placements in foster care are usually made in the hope of reuniting the children with their families. However, it has been found that in a great many cases, the longer a child stays in foster care, the more the chances of successfully reuniting them with their families tend to diminish.

One adolescent participant said:

“I was in foster care since I was a one year-old, so it has been sixteen years now living with my foster parent”.

#### **4.2.2. The meaning of foster care**

The adolescents preparing to leave foster care were asked to comment on what they felt was meant by being in foster care. In their responses, they all mentioned that it entailed being placed in the care of parents who are not biological parents. These responses indicate that they had a clear idea of what is meant by foster care, and that they were also aware that they, themselves, were in foster care, as is confirmed in the following responses:

“Being in foster care, it’s whereby someone or a child is placed with a family that is not their biological family, then that family starts to take care of him. For instance [myself] I am being taken care [of] by some parents because my mother left me when I was young and these parents are my foster parents” (Ms. 1, child in foster care).

“It’s when a child is being abandoned by his parents then there is someone out there who is able to take care of them and that person will become the foster parent” (Ms. 12, child in foster care).

“Foster care is being placed with other parents who are not yours to look after you” (Mr. 27, child in foster care).

Foster care is defined, for the purposes of this research, as the placement of a child in the care of a person, who is not the parent or guardian of the child, through an order of a Children’s Court, or a transfer, in terms of Section 171 of the Children’s Act, 2005 (South Africa, 2006). This excludes care of a child in a Child and Youth Care Centre or in temporary safe care. The Children’s Court may place a child with a person not related to the child, with a relative, who is not a parent or guardian of the child, or in a registered, cluster foster care centre (South Africa, 2006).

### 4.2.3: Reasons for being placed in foster care

The participants were asked if they knew why they had been placed in foster care. They all replied with confidence that they knew the reasons. Sixteen of the participants revealed that their biological mothers had passed away and that they did not know their fathers, and five, that their mothers had abandoned them and not come back for them, to date. The remaining nine participants explained that they were in foster care owing to neglect and inability to provide adequate care for them, on the part of their parents. The following responses give some of the reasons for these children being placed in foster care:

“The reason why I am in foster care is because my parents died when I was a little girl” (Ms.6, child in foster care).

“.....my foster mother told me that I was abandoned by my mother in the streets and the social workers took me to her” (Mr.19, child in foster care).

“.....my mother was always leaving us alone going to drink alcohol and she was not cooking for us because she will be drunk, so the social worker came to take us, me and my 2 sisters, so yah, that’s how I ended up in foster care” (Ms. 25, child in foster care).

A court order is needed for children to be placed in foster care. The process of placement begins with a social worker compiling a report recommending that a child should be placed in foster care. According to Section 150 of the Children’s Act 38 of 2005 (South Africa, 2006), a child is legally classified as being in need of care if the child:

- has been abandoned or orphaned, and is without any visible means of support.
- displays behaviour which cannot be controlled by parents or care-givers.

- lives or works on the streets, or begs for a living.
- is addicted to a dependence-producing substance, and is without any support to obtain treatment for such a dependency.
- has been exploited ,or lives in circumstances which expose the child to exploitation.
- lives in,or is exposed to, circumstances which may seriously harm the child's physical, mental or social well-being.
- may be at risk if returned to the custody of the parent, guardian or care-giver of the child, when there is reason to believe that he or she will live in, or be exposed to, circumstances which may seriously harm the physical, mental or social well-being of the child.
- is in a state of physical or mental neglect
- is being ill-treated, abused, deliberately neglected or degraded by a parent, a care-giver, a person who has parental responsibilities and rights, or a family member of the child, or by a person under whose control the child is. (South Africa, 2006)

If the child is found to be in need of care and protection by the courts according to any one of these criteria, the child is removed and placed in foster care.

#### **4.2.4. Foster care should be extended until after secondary education has been completed**

In this study the researcher wished to find out, from the perspectives of the interviewees themselves, how long they felt that they should remain in foster care. All of the interviewees were quite definitely of the opinion that they wished to remain in foster care after the age of eighteen years. They expressed the feeling that it would be better if they could leave foster care when they had completed their post-secondary studies, and

were financially, and emotionally, able to take care of themselves. Four of the adolescent participants expressed their feelings as follows:

“I think I should remain in foster care until I am able to take care of myself and have finished my tertiary studies” (Mr.3, child in foster care).

“I think I should remain in foster care until I am able to take care of myself financially and able to have my own place to stay” (Ms 7, child in foster care).

“I think I should remain in foster until I am finished school and ready to face the world” (Ms 21, child in foster care).

“It would be good if I remain in foster care until when I am ready to face the world the world outside, when I am done with maybe my tertiary studies” (Mr. 14, child in foster care).

The Life Course Perspective defines the transition to adulthood in terms of movement from dependent to more independent roles (Elder, 1980). The goal of this transition is to engage successfully with the adult world. This engagement takes the form of employment, financial self-sufficiency, independent living, continued education, building relationships and support systems, and becoming a contributing member of a larger community. Foster children very often encounter abnormal difficulty engaging successfully with adult society in these ways.

#### **4.3. Theme 2: Living in foster care**

Very little detailed information is available concerning the experiences of adolescents in foster care in South Africa. Approximately 500,000 children in South Africa live in foster

care today, many of these children being placed there owing to orphanhood, abuse and neglect. How these children with their complex histories of trauma, abuse and neglect cope in foster care remains a mystery. (Hall, 2011) It is therefore important that a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences of children and adolescents, while they are living in foster care, should be acquired. The following sub-themes were derived from the interviews with each of the thirty adolescents preparing to leave foster in East London, providing insights into their perceptions of living in foster care:

- Relationship with foster parents
- Positives of living in foster care
- Challenges faced in foster care
- Hopes after foster care

#### **4.3.1 Relationship with parents**

Sixteen of the participants maintained that they had good relationships with their foster parents, and that their foster parents provided support to them in various ways, including support with their education, emotional support, social support and by providing physical care.

“My relationship with my foster parent is very good. She takes care of me and listens to me” (Ms 5, child in foster care).

“I am happy with them, they give what I want, they take good care of me yah.....they are very good people” (Mr. 17, child in foster care).

“It’s a good relationship because they treat me like their own child, and I don’t feel like I am not welcome staying with them” (Ms.12, child in foster care).

However, fourteen of the participants said that their relationships with their foster parents had not always been good. According to one of the participants:

“My relationship with my foster parent has not been good during the first days in foster care. She had so many rules that I did not understand, so we were always fighting, but with time I got used to her and now I guess we understand each other. Although we have arguments, I just try so that I can have someone to take care of me” (Mr. 24, child in foster care).

A sense of family is important for both foster children and foster parents. The strong desire of a foster child to be accepted as a member of a family manifests itself particularly during the adolescent stage when children are trying to find out who they really are. A good relationship between a foster child and the foster parent is likely to be a beneficial influence on the development of the child. According to the Ecological Theory, a person is shaped by the interrelationships which exist between the individual, and others, in particular geographic and socially constructive environments or systems, including the individual, groups, families, the community, institutions, class and policies (Gitterman, 1999). In this study the adolescents preparing to leave foster care were found to have close relationships with their foster parents. The combination of a caring foster parent, who works patiently to care for a foster child, and a foster child, who not only recognises and appreciates the care given by the foster parent, but also is willing to respond to the kindness shown, creates the foundation for a successful foster relationship.

### 4.3.2 Positives gained from living in foster care

Very little evidence is available to identify the factors which may contribute towards positive results for children in foster care, as most studies focusing on adolescents leaving foster care on the grounds of age have tended to emphasise the vulnerability of the children and the negative consequences of being placed in foster care. One of the aims of this study is to investigate the positive experiences of children preparing to leave foster care. All of the participants showed signs of discomfort when talking about the benefits of foster care. All thirty of them responded that there was at least one beneficial consequence of being in foster care, and all the participants expressed strongly their appreciation of having a family to take care of them. One of the adolescents said:

“The main important benefit is having a family that cares about you” (Mr. 13, child in foster care).

Seventeen of the participants mentioned that they had learned a great deal about manners, good behaviour and values while they had been in foster care. According to two of the participants:

“When I first came here, I had the worst manners I could have. I would chew with my mouth open, talking while eating and I was very rude. My foster mother kept reminding me to have better manners when eating or responding to someone and noticed when I did and now I am even aware of my surrounding”. (Ms 19, child in foster care)

“When I first came to live with my foster parents, I was introduced to a family that was involved with church, so that helped me out a lot. I have also been taught better ways of living, for example, keeping my surroundings and myself clean and being a good strong Christian man”. (Mr. 7, child in foster care)

Other benefits of being in foster care mentioned by the participants included:

- Safety and protection from abuse and neglect.

- A shoulder to lean on
- Nutrition and food
- Attention and care
- Love
- Hope
- Medical attention
- Generosity
- Life skills

Some of the responses from the respondents included:

“I enjoy everything about foster care. I have a good meal every day and my foster parents always teach me how to respect my elders and not getting involved in things like drugs, gangsters and all” (Ms 11, child in foster care).

“The major benefit is having support from a caring family, which allowed me to believe in myself more. I play cricket and my foster parent always asks me about my games and encourages me” (Mr. 9, child in foster care).

#### **4.3.3 The challenges associated with being in foster care**

Irrespective of the form which the foster care may take, being placed in foster care inevitably results in an enormous upheaval in the life of a child, who often needs to adjust, not only to a new family, a new location, a new school and new peers, but to a new culture as well. Important decisions concerning the lives of foster children are in the hands of strangers, such as the courts, social welfare agencies, and substitute parents, any one of which may have custody of the child. All thirty participants mentioned that they had experienced at least one problem, or challenge, while they had been in foster care. Most of the participants, however, showed remarkable resiliency and

determination to get on with their lives . Among those children who had been placed in foster care owing to neglect, abandonment or abuse at the hands of their parents, the most commonly expressed desire was the wish to return to their own parents, even if they had been abused, neglected or abandoned by them.

One of these participants said:

“I sometimes wonder why my parents left me, just me alone, just leaving me there in the hospital, so sometimes when I talk with my friends about our parents I just find it difficult to understand why my parents did something like that to me. I wish I could meet them and ask them why they did that” (Ms 28, child in foster care).

The other main cause of distress highlighted by the participants was the difficulty brought by being separated from their siblings. Sibling relationships are emotionally strong and crucially important, not only in childhood, but during the course of a lifetime. For children their siblings form the first peer group, and they typically spend more time with each other than with anyone else. Children learn social skills, particularly in sharing and managing conflict, from negotiating with brothers and sisters. Sibling relationships can provide a significant source of continuity throughout a person’s life, and are likely to be the longest relationships which most people experience (Child Welfare, 2013). It is therefore very important to place siblings together in foster care, as being with siblings can enhance a child’s sense of safety and well-being and provide natural, mutual support. This benefit is in strong contrast with the traumatic consequences of separation, which may include additional feelings of loss, grief and anxiety concerning the well-being of siblings. Siblings have a shared history, and maintaining their mutual

bonds provides continuity of identity and belonging to children in foster care. One of the participants said:

“Yes, like when they took me when I was a little girl. I had 2 brothers and 2 sisters and we were separated so I kind of miss them and just want to be with them and see how are they wherever they are” (Ms.8 child in foster care).

Other challenges experienced by the adolescents preparing to leave foster care included:

- Feeling insecure and uncertain about their future.
- Difficulty discussing plans for time after the termination of foster care.

These challenges are highlighted in the following responses:

“My challenge is that sometimes I just think if my parents going to come and explain why they left me alone and it gets me worried that I will grow up not even knowing my relatives” (Ms 12, child in foster care).

“My biggest challenge in foster care is this constant feeling that I will be a burden to people when the foster care grant stops next year and sometimes it is hard for me to discuss the plans after school with my foster parents.....” (Ms 28, child in foster care).

#### **4.3.4. Hopes for life after foster care**

The study found that the children in foster care have hopes, dreams and aspirations for the time after the termination of foster care. Twelve of the participants volunteered that if funds allowed, or if they were to obtain a bursary, they would like to study further in order to obtain a certificate or a degree. Eight of the others felt that they would want to get a job first and then to study, in order to become self-sustaining before commencing studies. The remaining ten expressed a definite desire to have a job after foster care, as they felt that they needed to become self-supporting and independent, in order to

relieve their foster parents of the burden of paying for their upkeep. To summarise, among the adolescents preparing to leave foster care, twelve expressed the wish to study immediately, eight wanted to work before studying and ten wanted to start working.

#### **4.4 Theme Three: intervention by social workers during the period of preparing to leave foster care**

The research also sought to find out whether there are any interventions, services or programs which specifically cater for adolescents preparing to leave foster care. The following themes emerged from the interviews:

- Role of social workers
- Contact between social workers and adolescents preparing to leave foster care
- Support needed from social workers by adolescents preparing to leave foster care.

##### **4.4.1 Role of Social Workers**

Seventeen of the participants maintained that social workers assisted them when they had problems or when they simply needed advice, and in some cases provided material aid. The main problems to emerge during the interviews were conflicts with foster parents and under-performance at school. One interviewee said: :

“Whenever I have a problem I go to the social workers and ask for advice and they motivate me. Personally my social worker helped me when I had a problem with my schooling. I was struggling with mathematics and the social worker looked for someone to tutor me mathematics after class”. (Mr. 20, child in foster care).

“When I need help with schooling I sometimes go to the social workers”(Ms 13, child in foster care).

“Even though it’s difficult to have time with the social workers, I remember last time I did not have school shoes, I then went to my social worker that time and I told him my problem. The social worker gave me some shoes and even some clothing and I was able to go to school” (Mr. 17, child in foster care).

These responses highlight the roles played by social workers in the lives of the children, but they also indicate that the contributions made by the social workers towards the well-being of the children are made at the instigation of the children themselves. Adolescents preparing to leave foster care on the grounds of age face tremendous obstacles, including the unrealistic expectation that they will be able to succeed on their own when they turn eighteen. Support from social workers during this difficult period of transition is of paramount importance. Social workers play an integral part in the lives of the children in foster care. According to Thomas, (2005:118) : *“the worker to whom the child is assigned serves as the nucleus...the medium for surveillance and for assessment of the on-going life situation...and is responsible for working with each of the individuals involved...also responsible for arranging supplementary services, and integrating them.”*

#### **4.4.2. Contact between social workers and adolescents preparing to leave foster care**

The study found that social workers contact the foster children assigned to them only when they are performing their administrative duties, by compiling the report for the

children's court. In all other cases, it is incumbent upon the foster child or the foster parent to approach the social worker to request assistance. Few children placed in foster care receive further assistance from social workers, with the result that not much attention is given to the vulnerable population of adolescents preparing to leave foster care owing to the fact that their age compels them to do so, and this was reflected in the responses of the interviewees:

"I only remember my social worker visiting us last year when she was collecting my school report. She said she needed the school report so that I continue getting the foster care grant.....the only thing she asked me was about whether I still want to continue staying with my foster mother and I said yes and ja that was it" (Ms 12, child in foster care).

"The social worker only came once and gave me forms. The other one was a school form which required my teacher to put in my marks and all .....then the other one wanted me to go to the doctor and get examined and she requested me to come to the social worker's office with those forms completed...I went with the forms to the office and she just said its fine I will write a report to extend your foster care grant" (Mr. 22, child in foster care).

According to the Children's Act (Act No 38) of 2005 (South Africa, 2006), a social worker is the central person supporting a child in foster care. As has already been noted, a social worker investigates cases of children requiring care and protection, and compiles a report for the commissioner of child welfare. If the court finds that the child is, indeed, in need of care and protection, the child is placed in foster care through a court order, which is usually valid for two years. The social worker will then assist the foster parents to apply for a foster care grant using the court order. In those cases where the child has been in foster care for a period of two years, following placement

through a court order valid for two years, a report is compiled, recommending extension of foster care and the continued payment of the foster care grant.

#### **4.4.3 Support needed from social workers by adolescents preparing to leave foster care**

The adolescents preparing to leave foster care all felt that the social workers needed to do more for them. Twenty-three of the participants felt that the social workers did not spend time with them and that they should be able to have one-to-one sessions with them, in which to try to locate the hidden causes of the problems which they have been struggling to overcome. Relationships between social workers and foster children tend to be disjointed, owing to the high turnover of social worker staff members. A child in foster care may fail to establish rapport with a particular social worker because he, or she, may have passed through the hands of more than five social workers by the time that he, or she, eventually leaves foster care. As a result, the opportunity to build trust is lost, and the child tends to perceive that there is no point in opening up to the social worker because the social worker will eventually leave, as they always seem to do. The following response from an adolescent preparing to leave foster care sums up the problem :

“I would like social workers to come spend time with us, talk with us and understand us. Sometimes it’s really cold being in foster care, and also social workers should not change too much” (Ms 12, child in foster care).

#### **4.5 Theme Four: Children's knowledge of their birth families**

Foster children are removed from their families of origin and placed with other families for a certain period of time. The separation causes them a great deal of anguish, and they tend to experience feelings of anger, guilt, sadness and frustration (Cook, 2004). The participants were asked to describe their relationship with their families of origin. The following two sub-themes emerged:

- Contact with the birth family
- Possibility of reuniting with the family at the end of foster care.

##### **4.5.1 Contact with the birth family**

Regular contact with birth parents tends to reassure children in several important ways: the child can see that the parents care enough to visit, and the child can also see that all the significant adults in the foster child's life, such as the birth parents, the foster parents and the social workers, are working together with the common purpose of ensuring the child's well-being, which can greatly enhance the feeling of being wanted and the sense of belonging. Contact with the birth parents also helps children to express their feelings. One of the adolescents preparing to leave foster care said:

"Whenever my mother comes to see me I always ask her why she can't stop drinking and just be a normal person, but I guess she has her reasons. (Ms 22, child in foster care).

Twenty-one of the participants maintained that they did not have contact with their birth families, as is borne out in the following responses:

“I have heard that my family is in the Western Cape, but I have never met them and I don’t want to meet them because they never made any effort to look for me” (Ms 27, child in foster care).

“I don’t know my parents or relatives, so I have never met them” (Ms 16, child in foster care).

“I only remember the day my mother left me at the social worker’s office. Ever since I have never seen her, never heard she tried to look for me (Ms 9, child in foster care).

The lack of contact with their families is likely to have effects on the children’s development. According to Arnett, et al. (2006), studies around the world have shown that successful development during the years of emerging adulthood is inextricably linked to relationships with the birth family, and that these relationships influence developmental trajectories and life changes in adulthood. The lack of contact is also likely to result in difficulties, should reunification be attempted. According to Perumal and Kasiram (2008:161), reuniting families which have disintegrated is often difficult in South Africa, owing to the fact that biological families are rapidly disintegrating as a result of the influence of factors such as migrant labour, divorce, teenage pregnancies, infertility, child abandonment, HIV and AIDS and premature death.

#### **4.5.2 The possibility of reuniting children with their families at the end of foster care**

All of the twenty-one participants, who maintained that they did not have any contact with their birth families, ruled out the possibility of reuniting with their families because they did not know them, or feel any attachment to them. These sentiments were expressed in the following responses to the question of whether it would be possible to go back to the birth family:

“No, never because I don’t like them anymore” (Ms 3, child in foster care).

“My mother passed away and I don’t have any information concerning my father, so I don’t think I will one day be with my family members” (Ms 17, child in foster care).

“As for me, it’s been 15 years in foster care and I have never seen any of my relatives coming to look for me, so it’s not possible for me to stay with them now because I don’t know them and I don’t think they even know if I still exist” (Ms. 2, child in foster care).

Research in the field of child welfare consistently suggests that the strongest indicator of whether the reunification of a family is either likely, or possible, is the degree of contact between children and the birth family. It is highly unlikely to be possible to reunite children who have been in foster care for more than twelve years without having had any contact with their birth families during that time.

#### **4.6. Findings from interviews held with social workers**

A social worker plays an important role in the life of a foster child. According to the Children’s Act 38, 2005 (South Africa, 2006), a social worker is the person responsible for the placement of a child in foster care. Among the services provided by social workers the following are most important: working with the birth family to create and implement a plan to care for the foster child; setting and helping to meet goals for the child’s development; monitoring the progress of the child and the family through supervision, support and both planned and unannounced visits. Owing to the roles which social workers play in the lives of foster children, it was vital for the purposes of this study to investigate their perceptions of the experiences of adolescents preparing to leave foster care on the grounds of age. The details of the five participants who were social workers are shown in table below.

**Table 2: Details of social workers**

<b>Participant. (Social Worker).</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Number of years at Child Welfare South Africa in East London</b>	<b>Number years working with foster children</b>
<b>Ms A</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Ms B</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Ms C</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Ms D</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Ms E</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>

On average, each social worker had worked at Child Welfare South Africa in East London for only two years. This is indicative of a high turnover of social workers employed by this organisation. Magome (2008) maintained that many reasons could be given for the high turnover among members of the social work profession, including poor working conditions, poor remuneration, lack of resources and support and increased demands for the services provided by social workers. From the researcher's own experience as a social worker, they also tend to experience a great deal of stress, burnout and compassion fatigue in the course of performing their duties, which places enormous strain on both their personal and their professional resources, which would certainly have an influence on the high rate of turnover noted. The high rate of turnover among social workers could also be attributed to the great shortage of social workers. According to Magome (2008), the shortage of social workers constitutes a huge challenge for the South African foster care system.

#### **4.7. Theme One: The foster care process**

The social workers participating in the study were asked questions concerning their understanding of the foster care process, and the following sub-themes emerged:

- Long, arduous and complex process
- The adolescent stage is crucial for any child in foster care

##### **4.7.1 Long, arduous and complex process**

It was made clear by the social workers that the foster care process consumed the bulk of their time, which led the researcher to conclude that these circumstances would, in all probability, leave the social workers with little, or no, time to provide support to those children who are already in foster care, particularly the adolescents who are preparing to leave foster care on the grounds of age. According to Meintjies and Van Niekerk (2005), the vast numbers of foster care cases are placing severe strain on the child protection system in South Africa, making it difficult for social workers to attend to those children who are abused and neglected. Although the study found foster care to be the best option for children in need of care and protection, since it provides them with a healthy and protective family environment in which to grow, it was made clear that foster care is a long, arduous and complex process. Ms B expressed this assessment as follows:

“I think foster care is the most ideal option for securing a home environment for a homeless child or a child in need of care. However, the negative part of the process of foster care is so tiresome and it takes a lot of time because you find that we social workers we move up and down trying to match the child’s physical needs, psychological needs, health needs, and emotional needs. It is a tiresome process if I can say so.” (Ms B Social Worker).

When a child is placed in foster care, the child automatically qualifies for a foster care grant, which is received monthly by the foster parent on behalf of the child. This, however, complicates the process of foster care because it is difficult for a social worker to establish whether a prospective foster parent is really interested in providing a family environment for the child, or is interested in the foster care grant, which accompanies the child. This is borne out by the following response:

“The foster care process is always complicated..... difficult to find suitable foster parents .... when you find suitable parents they become more interested in the foster grant, not the responsibilities that come with fostering, all they think about is that they are financially secured because most foster parents are coming from poor backgrounds” (Ms C Social Worker).

#### **4.7.2 The adolescent stage is a crucial one for any child in foster care**

All of the participants regarded the adolescent stage as a stage associated with internal and external influences in the child’s life. The adolescent stage of life is often accompanied by a great deal of confusion, anxiety and uncertainty. It is a time when young adults are needing and receiving more help from their parents and various support systems than at other stages of their lives (Furstenberg, et.al 2005). According to Ms E:

“The most critical stage in terms of development of the child is teenage hood because of the world, the media influences .....The teenagers want to be the same as to what they think is fashionable. All children want to have, and there is not one child who wants to have not.....so if the children are on the side of have-nots they are affected, they started to drop out from school, poor academic performance and can become rebellious or they even start drugs”.( Ms E Social Worker).

This study is underpinned by Erikson's Psychosocial Theory of Human Development (1968), in which it is maintained that adolescence is the time in which individuals begin to develop their identities, their capacity to develop and maintain intimate relationships, and the ability to take on adult responsibilities. Although the responses of the adolescent participants indicated quite clearly that they had a sense of their individual identities and of the need to assume adult responsibilities, for them the transition to adulthood is made more difficult by their complex histories of neglect, abuse and abandonment, which in turn would have no small bearing on the anxiety at the prospect of leaving foster care at the age of 18 years which was expressed, in various ways, by several of the interviewees.

#### **4.8. Theme Two: Children preparing to leave foster care on the grounds of age**

One of the aims of interviewing the participants who were social workers was to find out about their experiences of preparing children to leave foster care. The following sub-themes emerged:

- The challenges involved in preparing children to leave foster care
- The positive aspects of being placed in foster care

##### **4.8.1. The challenges involved in preparing children to leave foster care**

The study concluded that most children who are released from foster care are unprepared for life in the outside world. For adolescents making the transition to adulthood by leaving foster care, the risk of adverse consequences for their development is thought to be far greater than it would be for their peers who are not in

foster care, for the simple reason that they are usually on their own at a much younger age than their counterparts living with their own families are (Collins, 2001). For eight years, researchers in America have followed approximately 600 young adults who had left the child welfare systems in Iowa, Wisconsin and Illinois when they reached the age which compelled them to do so. The report found that between the ages of 23 and 24 years, former foster children are more likely than their peers to be unemployed, convicted of a crime, homeless, pregnant and uneducated (Cook et al. 2007).

In her response, Ms A maintained that although social workers had a duty to prepare a child to face the realities of life outside of foster care, when a foster child turns eighteen he or she has to be released, from foster care, whether ready or not. Ms A continued by saying:

“There are a lot of challenges surrounding this stage, because this is the stage when we, as social workers, are supposed to prepare the child to face the reality of life [and] to face the challenges of life...However, if the child [is] not ready he is still going to get out of foster care, so it’s difficult”. (Ms A Social Worker).

According to Ms D:

“Children aging out of foster care need help because as a social worker you can see that after foster care stops, this child does not have parents or other family members or people to turn to but then there is nothing you can do personally as a social worker other than to terminate the foster care and just think that the foster parent and the child will make a plan on their own”. (Ms D, social worker)

#### **4.8.2 The positive aspects of being placed in foster care**

All of the participants who were social workers felt that there were benefits to be gained by placing a child in foster care. Ms A said:

“The positive could be that the child would have a suitable upbringing with that family (foster family) and have good moral values” (Ms A, social worker).

Implicit in Ms A’s assertion is that, by the time the child reaches the age at which he or she is required to leave foster care, it can be assumed that the child would have benefited in some way from the time spent in foster care. It could be argued, though, that by placing children in foster care, social workers exchange one set of unsatisfactory circumstances for another, and that the wish to protect a child could result in the break-up of a family. Although an abusive family environment is undoubtedly harmful to a child’s development, removing a child from home may be traumatic as well (Barth, 1999).

The cases of children who have been investigated for abuse or neglect are not followed up over time in a systematic manner. According to Benjamin et al. (2002), there are two main limitations hindering the assessment of placements in foster care as beneficial. First, there is a lack of data concerning the long-term results of being placed in foster care. Secondly, comparisons can be contaminated by other factors: foster children faring worse than other children in the same area could be the result of abusive family backgrounds, as opposed to any effect resulting from placement in foster care (Benjamin, Wildfire, and Barth, 2002).

#### **4.9. Theme 3: Intervention by social workers during the period of preparing to leave foster care**

As had been done in the interviews conducted with the adolescent participants, the research endeavoured to discover whether there were any services or programs

catering specifically for the needs of for adolescents preparing to leave foster care on the grounds of age. A single sub-theme emerged from the responses of the participants.

- No specific services or programs for children preparing to leave foster care

#### **4.9.1. No specific services or programs for children preparing to leave foster care**

The responses of the participants who were social workers suggested that, in the case of the adolescents leaving foster care, the exchanges between the person, (the adolescent leaving foster care) and the environment, ( the government, the placement organisation and the social workers) are negative. When asked whether there were any services or programs offered specifically to children leaving foster care on the grounds of age, all of the participants replied that they were not aware of any services or programs which were meant specifically for this group of children, as is borne out in these responses:

“There is no specific program that I know that is specifically directed to the children aging out of care except for the government programs directed at youth” (Ms D, social worker).

“I am not aware of any specific program or service directed to children aging out of foster care but I think something should be done for them” (Ms E, social worker).

In terms of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Theory of 1979, exchanges between persons and their environments can be positive, negative or neutral. When exchanges are positive the environment produces resources and experiences at the right time in the right form to ensure the individual’s cognitive, emotional, biological and social development and functioning. When exchanges are negative, the individual’s

development and functioning may be impaired and the environment may be damaged (Germain and Gitterman, 1996). Adolescents leaving foster care can be thought of as individual systems which work interdependently with other systems in their environment, including the biological family, the foster family, friends, the government, the placement organisation and the social workers. The destinies of the adolescents are therefore partly shaped by the opportunities, policies and attitudes of the ecological environment in which they exist.

#### **4.10 Theme Four: Involvement by the birth family in the fostering process**

The research sought to investigate the involvement of the birth family in the fostering process, particularly during the period of preparing to leave foster care when the age which makes it mandatory to do so is approaching. The participants who were social workers were asked whether family members or relatives were involved during this period and, if they were, how they were involved. The responses indicated that it was often very difficult, and sometimes impossible, to involve the families of the adolescents who were leaving foster care.

Ms A said:

“The family is usually there for the reunification of the child but sometimes the families will be disintegrated or sometimes dead or the child might not even know the parents because the child has been in foster care for a long time” (Ms A, social worker).

Ms A felt that involvement by the birth family became difficult because contact had not been maintained while the child had been in foster care. She also implied that the reasons for the child’s removal from the family might still be relevant, which would make involving family members difficult. Foster adolescents do not always have the option of

turning to their birth families for support. As a result, adolescents leaving the foster care system are becoming homeless at disconcerting rates (White, 2005). According to White (2005), 75 per cent of children in foster care are taken from their homes because their parents fail to care adequately for them. This failure may be brought about by a sudden calamity, such as physical or mental illness or the imprisonment of a parent, or the parents may be addicted to illegal drugs or alcohol and as a result oblivious of their parental responsibilities and prone to abuse, neglect or abandon their children.

#### **4.11. Theme Five: Termination of foster care**

This theme refers to the stage at which the children actually leave foster care. When the social workers were asked what happens when a child leaves foster care, all five of them replied that when a child in foster care turns 18 they close the file and all services are terminated, except when the child is still at school, in which case the placement in foster care can be extended until the age of twenty-one years. Unless a foster child is still in secondary school, there will not be any kind of support given once he or she has turned eighteen and the child will be on his or her own, which means that foster care comes to an abrupt end, and that the adolescents are expected to become independent immediately. By contrast, their peers who have not been living in foster care usually still enjoy the support of their families and have other support systems at the age of 18.

When foster care is terminated, not only do the adolescents lose the support which they had received from the state, but in all probability, they will not have the support which is normally given by families to children when they encounter difficulties while adjusting to the realities of independent living. The physical and psychological well-being of many

foster children is often severely compromised before they enter the foster care system as a result of the trauma of abuse and neglect in their birth families, removal from their homes , a pattern of many successive placements in foster care and so on (Cook et al., 2007). Two of the social workers expressed their thoughts on the matter as follows:

“In my opinion when the children (in foster care) are terminated the children should have information about community development, they should have knowledge about community development resources when the child is discharged the child should have information about the community” (Ms D, social worker).

“I think it would be better if the government can build centres for these children that would have left foster care and won't have anywhere to go....or provide stipends to these children so that they won't turn to crime in order to sustain themselves” (Ms E, social worker).

Even though all of the participants confirmed that services to children are immediately terminated and that no further services are provided when a child in foster care turns 18, there was a general pattern in their responses which suggested that they all felt that there was a great need to continue to support the children who left foster care on the grounds of age.

#### **4.12. Conclusion**

This chapter presented the results of the study, which established conclusively that the adolescent stage is a crucial stage for children leaving foster care and that there is a great need to pay special attention to these vulnerable adolescents. It also found that there was general consensus among these adolescents that the age of 18 years was too young an age for them to be released from the foster care system. The adolescent participants felt that it would be better for them to be released when they were able to

take care of themselves, after finding a job or finishing post-secondary school studies. However, the study also found that foster care is the best form of alternative care for children who have no families to take care of them. The adolescents all identified having the support of a family as a positive aspect of being placed in foster care. The findings of the study made it abundantly clear that the brief of social workers needs to be extended, particularly in their work with children preparing to leave foster care on the grounds of age, and even more particularly in view of the fact that, at present, their roles are in effect confined to administering the processing of grants, and there are no specific programs or interventions dedicated to providing assistance to children leaving the foster care system. The next chapter presents a summary of the findings of the study, the conclusions to be drawn from the findings and the recommendations which are offered as a result of the insights provided by the study. The chapter will also include the implications of the findings for social work practice and suggestions for further studies.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter provides a summary of the findings of the study, draws conclusions from these findings, offers recommendations and discusses the implications of the findings for social work practice. The limitations encountered during the research process are discussed and suggestions for future studies are made at the end of the chapter. In depth information was obtained from the adolescent participants and the social workers who took part in the study in one-to-one interviews. It is believed that the overall aims and objectives of the study have been met and that the research questions have been answered by the findings of the study. The following section presents a detailed summary of these findings.

#### **5.2. Summary of Findings**

The qualitative interviews with five social workers and thirty adolescents affirm that the adolescent stage is a crucial one for any child in foster care. It is at this stage that a child in foster care will be going through two simultaneous processes. According to Arnett (2000), this stage has been characterised as stressful and filled with uncertainty. It is even difficult to imagine the distress and anxiety which adolescents preparing to leave foster care experience, although most of them have experienced a great deal of stress and trauma in their lives as a result of being removed from their homes, usually following prolonged neglect or abuse, being placed into the foster care system and so

on. The following summary of findings is based on the three research questions of the study.

### **5.2.1. How do foster adolescents perceive the process of preparing to leave foster care when required by age to do so?**

In order to understand completely the experiences of adolescents preparing to leave foster care, it was imperative first to understand how the adolescents viewed the process of preparing to leave foster care because they were approaching the age which made it mandatory for them to do so. An attempt was made to establish whether the adolescents in foster care understood the meaning of foster care itself. The study found that the adolescents preparing to leave foster care had a general understanding of what is meant by the term foster care, and that they were completely aware that they themselves were in foster care.

The high prevalence of HIV and AIDS in South Africa has resulted in there being more than 3 million orphaned children in South Africa: parents are dying and leaving behind orphaned children (Meintjies and Van Niekerk, 2005:2). Orphaned children automatically qualify for foster care and, consequently, one of the main reasons for children being placed in foster care in ever-increasing numbers is orphanhood. In addition, South African communities are burdened by high numbers of children who are abused and neglected, mainly owing to the inability of their parents to take care of them, a phenomenon that is itself inextricably linked to the all-pervasive grinding poverty to be found in various areas in South Africa. The study found that more than half of the

adolescents had been placed in foster care because they were orphans, apart from those who had been placed there owing to abuse and neglect. Where the process of foster care itself is concerned, the study established that although it is a long, arduous and complex process, it was nevertheless evident that foster care remains the best option for taking care of children who are in need of care and protection. Most of the adolescents who participated in the study had been in foster care for more than twelve years. The study found that the longer a child stays in foster care, the greater the chances are that they will remain there until they are required by age to leave.

In the literature review it was suggested that today, young adults at the adolescent stage need and receive more help from their parents than their counterparts in past generations did (Furstenberg, Rumbaut, & Settersten, 2005). In agreement with this assessment, the findings of this study indicate that the adolescents view the process of foster care as incomplete, and that they feel that it ends before they are ready. Many suggested that they would like to see the support received during foster care to be extended until after secondary school had been completed. Most of the adolescents preparing to leave foster care who were interviewed maintained that when they turned eighteen, they would not be ready, or well prepared, to try to cope on their own with the world outside.

### **5.2.2. What do adolescents in foster care consider beneficial and what do they consider challenging about leaving foster care?**

The main purpose of foster care is to protect and nurture a child, and this is done by providing a safe and healthy environment, with sufficient support to meet the needs of the child (Meintjes, Budlender, Giese & Johnson 2003). Being required to leave foster care on the grounds of age constitutes a dramatic period of transition, challenge, and opportunity (Arnett, 2000). In South Africa foster care is guided by the Children's Act 38 of 2005 and according to the Act, a child placed in foster care is required to leave care at the age of eighteen, or at the age of twenty-one if the child is still pursuing secondary school education, which is generally rare.

The study found that one of the benefits for children in foster care, which was recognised by them as such, was having a family to take care of them, and that even those preparing to leave foster care on the grounds of age did so within the confines of a family environment. Among the many benefits for a child being placed in foster care, the following were highlighted by the study:

- Safety and protection from abuse and neglect.
- Emotional support.
- Nutrition and food.
- Attention and care.

- Love.
- Hope.
- Medical attention.
- Generosity.
- Life skills.

For those adolescents preparing to leave foster care on the grounds of age, the findings of the research indicated that the benefits are assumed to come from the foster care process itself. The adolescents are assumed to have gained independence and the ability to make their own decisions. The fact that those leaving foster care have a lot to deal with at a young age, compared with their peers who are not in foster care, allows them to take responsibility for their actions and decisions, but it is felt that this is not necessary beneficial for all adolescents in this situation.

The study also found that the process of preparing to leave foster care can be beneficial in that it seems to create a sense of resilience and even self-reliance in some of the adolescents, in that many of them expressed hopes, aspirations and ambitions concerning their lives after foster care had been terminated, when they turned eighteen. According to Yates, Dodds, Egeland and Sroufe (2003), resilience reflects a developmental process wherein the individual is able to make use of resources, from both within and outside of the self, to negotiate challenges faced at present in order to develop a foundation of experience, which will inform future decisions to confront

challenges which arise subsequently. In the contexts of the problems which saw them being placed in foster care and of those which they face while preparing to leave the system, this resilience reflects multiform competence, which is characterised by both the absence of psychopathology and the presence of the adaptive capacities needed to negotiate through the period of leaving foster care, with hope for and belief in a better life that lies ahead. The resilience exhibited by the adolescents preparing to leave foster care provides significant insights concerning the strengths and resources which these children have.

Although the study found that there are benefits to be had from both being placed in foster care and leaving it on the grounds of age, there are many factors which affect the experiences of children in foster care adversely. Children in foster care arrive at the adolescent stage of life on waves of experiences caused by disrupted family life, feelings of disjointed time in foster care and marked vulnerabilities which undermine their ability to adapt sufficiently in order to negotiate the challenges which accompany reaching adolescence (Arnett, 2000). The study found that the adolescents in foster care experience insecurities and often feel uncertain regarding their future. During the process of preparing to leave foster care, these feelings of insecurity and uncertainty are likely to be magnified as these adolescents prepare to leave relationships and forms of support upon which they have learned to depend.

According to Arnett and Tanner (2006), evidence suggests that adolescents leaving foster care often experience difficulty maintaining a state of mind in which the cognitive and the emotional components are balanced, especially when emotions are strongly

aroused, as happens when security and survival are threatened. As had been found in much of the literature included in the literature review, the findings of this study indicated that there was a cloud of uncertainty hanging over the children who were interviewed, leaving them wondering where they will find the emotional and material support, the resources and the social connections needed to negotiate the changes brought by early adulthood.

The study also found that the adolescents preparing to leave foster care found it difficult to discuss their plans for the future. These adolescents lack various forms of much-needed support during this most crucial stage in their lives. It is acknowledged in the literature review that one of the vital support systems for adolescents in foster care is provided by the social workers, but the findings of this research revealed that during the period in which the children prepare to leave foster care there is no support from the social workers. If a child who is preparing to leave foster care is sufficiently self-reliant and confident to feel free from worries or insecurities, he or she would be able to focus on improving his or her relationships within the foster family and be able to develop mentally and emotionally as a result, but this is likely to be the lot of the fortunate, hardy, few only.

It is well documented in the literature that successful development during the years of emerging adulthood is inextricably linked to relationships with the birth family, which influence developmental trajectories and life changes in adulthood (Arnett & Tanner, 2006). However, this study found that there is usually a lack of support from the birth family during the period in which the adolescents prepare to leave the foster care

system, and instead it was found that the birth family is rarely involved during this period: if there is involvement, the amount of contact is small and usually diminishes over time.

### **5.2.3. What do designated social workers provide to adolescents preparing to leave foster care on the grounds of age in the way of preparation and support?**

According to Courtney et al. (2001), preparing adolescents, who are nearing the age at which they will be required to leave the foster care system, to make this transition successfully is a crucial task for child welfare systems. The literature reviewed strongly suggested that adolescents in foster care do not fare well during the process of preparing to leave on the grounds of age. Other studies have reported high rates of depression and incidences of the symptoms of depression among adolescents in this vulnerable group. (McMillen et al, 2005). For the children in foster care, the social worker is a central person, (Thomas, 2005) and it is acknowledged in this study that the social worker plays a variety of roles in the lives of these children. The foster care system in South Africa faces numerous challenges and their consequences are far-reaching. One of the most serious challenges confronting the foster care system results from the fact that social workers are overloaded with huge case loads, which makes it highly unlikely that children placed in foster care will receive much in the way of meaningful support from social workers, with the inevitable consequence that not much attention will be given to the vulnerable population of adolescents preparing to leave foster care. The study found that when the adolescents interviewed had been in need of help or support it had been incumbent upon them to initiate contact with the social workers.

It was clear from the findings of the study that no form of assistance or support is given to help adolescents to prepare to leave foster care when the time came for them to do so. The adolescents even went so far as to suggest that more support was needed from the social workers, as they felt that not enough was being done for them as they approached the end of their time in foster care. The study found that when a child in foster care turns 18, he or she is eligible for no more support from the foster care system and the child's file is closed. The cessation of foster care is abrupt and is likely to result in feelings of stress, anxiety or depression in a child who has depended for a long period of time upon the support received while in foster care.

### **5.3 Conclusions**

The aim of the study was to investigate the experiences of adolescents preparing to leave the foster care system in East London on the grounds of age. An appraisal of the adolescents' perceptions of this process has been provided. It emerged very clearly from the study that the adolescent stage is the most crucial one for any child in foster care, and that the foster care process itself is long, arduous and complex. For the adolescents preparing to leave, the foster care process is incomplete and it ends at a time when they are still in need of crucial support. They felt that foster care support should be extended beyond the age of eighteen years, and at least to the age at which they complete their tertiary studies or have become self-supporting. The study found that the adolescents view the process of preparing to leave foster care as very stressful and emotionally draining because it requires them to go through the difficult stage of adolescence alone and without any support from social workers or the government. However, it was also found that foster care still remains the best form of alternative care

and the best means of providing children with care and protection, and that there are many positive aspects of being placed in foster care and that the adolescents appreciated having a family to take care of them.

It was found in the literature that the burdens borne by adolescents preparing to leave foster care are often great and manifold. Many of them have been exposed to physical, mental and emotional trauma prior to entering the foster care system, making them particularly vulnerable from the outset, quite apart from the fact that they are expected to become independent at a much earlier age than adolescents in the general population. It has been noted that adolescents preparing to leave foster care experience feelings of uncertainty about their future and the anxieties which accompany these feelings, often resulting in their being either unable or reluctant to discuss their plans for life after foster care. When adolescents leave the foster care system, not only do they lose the support which they had received from the state upon emancipation, but they may not have the types of support which are usually available from birth families to children not in foster care when they encounter difficulties in their early adult lives. By contrast, it was also found that the adolescents tended to be resilient and full of hope, believing that their lives would turn out well after leaving foster care.

The study did find that not enough is being done by social workers to support adolescents preparing to leave foster care, as a result of the roles of social workers being limited to fulfilling their administrative duties, leaving them with little or no time in which to provide support to and cater for the special needs of the adolescents preparing to leave foster care. According to the NWSSDF (2007), owing to the bottlenecks arising

as a result of the heavy burden being imposed on the foster care system by the escalating numbers of orphans requiring care and the complexity of the foster care process itself, social workers have no time for any work other than processing foster care applications through the children's courts and ensuring the payment of foster care grants. This was borne out by the findings of the study, which identified the lack of contact between social workers and those adolescents preparing to leave foster care, and the fact that whenever there was contact between the adolescents and the social workers it would almost always have been initiated by the adolescents themselves.

It has also been noted that the end of foster care is abrupt and that it does not take into account whether the child is ready to leave foster care or not, and that termination of foster care coincides with the immediate cessation of any type of support which the child had been receiving, leaving him or her alone, without the safety nets normally provided by families and being expected to cope on his or her own. The study also found that when a child leaves foster care on the grounds of age there is no follow-up of any sort afterwards and that neither the social workers, nor government, are concerned with what happens to the child once the child's file has been closed and all forms of support have been terminated.

From this study it can be concluded that the experiences of adolescents preparing to leave foster care are both complex and not a little frightening. They are, for all intents and purpose, ignored and left to go through this difficult period of transition alone. When

this state of affairs is further compounded by the fact that even for children in more secure situations adolescence is often characterised as a time of great uncertainty and confusion, it should be very obvious indeed that these adolescents are in dire need of extraordinary forms of support to guide them through this uniquely difficult period in their lives. However, it was found by this study that these adolescents do not get the support which they so desperately need in any form at all. The social workers are too busy to attend to them owing to the fact that they are overloaded with high case loads, and, according to the social workers, the foster care process is simply too long, arduous and complex. These crucial observations, however, do not in any way undermine the importance of foster care as the best available option as a means of providing alternative care to children who are in need of care and protection. From the mouths of the adolescents who were interviewed for this study, foster care provided them with what they needed most in the form of a family to take care of them.

#### **5.4. Implications of the findings for social work practice, social work and the ecological theory**

At its core social work involves work with interconnected transactional networks. The ecosystems perspective has been almost universally accepted in social work because it provides a framework for thinking about and understanding those networks in their complexity. Since the beginning of the profession, practice has been focused on the interrelationships between persons and their environments in order to understand the psychosocial matrix of which individuals, families, groups, and communities are constituents (Engelbreton, 2010). As has been learned from the findings of this study, most of the children who are placed in foster care leave the foster care system only

when compelled by age to do so. It is anticipated that the conclusions of this study will have implications for social work practice as a result of its attempt to provide a holistic assessment of the experiences and perceptions of children preparing to leave foster care on the grounds of age.

In order to pursue the avenue of enquiry opened by this study in all of its complexity, the aspects of social work which focus on human development need to be emphasised if social workers are to become more effective where providing support to foster children is concerned, and specifically the support desperately needed by adolescents who are preparing to leave the foster care system on the grounds of age.

The findings of this study indicate quite unequivocally that it is both unrealistic and completely lacking in compassion to expect these adolescents, who have had the support which they received while they were in foster care abruptly terminated by the stroke of a pen and the closing of a file, to make the transition to adult life without any further support from social workers. At present these children are being dumped and neglected by the very same professionals who provided them with support by placing them in foster care. The social work professionals who are involved with providing care and protection to children need to be educated concerning the realities of children being compelled to leave foster care on the grounds of age. There is an overwhelming need to develop exit strategies for children leaving foster care to replace the present policy of terminating all foster care support the moment the child reaches the age which requires him or her to leave the system. It would be especially valuable to disseminate reports

focusing on the effectiveness of the methods which may be used to provide these exit strategies among social work practitioners, educators, researchers and students.

Social work interventions range from primarily person-focused psychosocial processes to involvement in social policy, planning and development. Social workers' voices need to be included in planning and the formulation of policy. The formulation of legislation pertaining to social work needs to be guided and informed by intensive research which is informed by the experiences and conclusions of social workers working in the field. Social workers need to have agendas to influence policy and to advocate for support from the government to combat identified social problems.

Finally, the challenges which social workers currently face while attempting to fulfill all of their obligations towards those whom they serve, and the plight of adolescents leaving foster care on the grounds of age, need to be prioritised and publicised through an accompanying research agenda which focuses solely on this area of social work practice. This agenda should seek to investigate the theoretical, practical and policy contexts which have resulted in poor practice and through which positive changes can be made. It is the combination of these changes which will, it is to be hoped, bring about changes in the ways in which social workers work to provide support to foster children to help them to overcome the trauma of their past histories, and to take their rightful place in society as citizens who have a positive contribution to make.

## 5.5. Recommendations

From the findings and conclusions of the study, the following recommendations are put forward:

- First, there is need for programs and services which cater specifically for adolescents preparing to leave foster care on the grounds of age. Around the world, foster care is supported by legislation which takes into account all aspects of child development, and consequently, attention is given to those who are in the process of leaving foster care on the grounds of age. Young people who remain in foster care systems until required by age to leave them fare significantly worse during early adulthood than their peers in the general population, with low rates of educational attainment and employment and high rates of criminal involvement and homelessness being associated with those who spent their youth and adolescence in foster care (Courtney et al., 2010). Our social service system needs to focus increased attention on the needs of this vulnerable sector of our population and to help them to make the transition to adulthood successfully and , in the interests of society as a whole.
- The study has highlighted that social workers are not doing enough to support the children preparing to leave foster care. The social workers are working within a child protection system which is trying to cope with ever-increasing numbers of foster care cases, making it difficult, if not impossible, for them to attend to other needs of children in foster care, particularly those who are preparing to leave the system. It is therefore recommended that the government should strive to

confront the challenges which face social workers in the child protection sector at present, including those challenges resulting from the high turnover of social workers, which at present adversely affects their ability to provide support to children in foster care.

### **5.6. Limitations of the Study**

As always is the case with research, some limitations were encountered during the study. According to Fouche (2005:119), 'problems are never completely eliminated from any study in the caring professions: the researcher must spell out the various means by which he tries to limit the problems'.

Carrying out the research in the homes of the participants involved distractions such as crying babies, friends and family calling the participant and so on. The participants had to attend to these interruptions and then continue with the interviews, which caused them sometimes to lose concentration or the thread of a discussion. The tape recorder had to be played back in some cases, in order to remind the participant of the point from which the interview should continue. However, changes in the demeanour of the participant were often noted in terms of gestures and even the tone of voice adopted by the participant.

There were also problems locating the physical addresses of the homes of some of the participants, some of whom lived in informal settlements, where homes are often not numbered in an orderly manner. Locating these homes took a great deal of time in some cases. The interviews which were conducted in the homes of the participants

involved travelling, which incurred high financial costs. Making appointments with the participants sometimes involved travelling more than once to a particular home because some participants could not be found during the first visit. This was common among the participants who were in Grade 12, as in most of these instances they would have been attending extra classes. The social worker from Child Protection helped to minimize the costs involved in travelling by providing transport and assisting to locate the homes of some of the participants for the study.

The topic of the study was a very sensitive one, and during the interviews most of the participants became emotionally involved, as the questions reminded them that they either did not have parents, or else had been abandoned by their own parents. However, counseling was provided to these participants and the researcher constantly checked how they felt by asking questions which reflected how they felt at various points during the interviews. Debriefing sessions were provided at the end of the interviews and encouragement was given, to most of the participants, to work hard in their studies in order to make their hopes and dreams come true.

### **5.7. Suggestions for Further Studies**

Further research is needed if interventions are to be devised in a manner which is responsive to all of the needs of the adolescents preparing to leave foster care on the grounds of age. Where further research is concerned, it is recommended that:

- Research needs to be done to follow up and to investigate the lives of the adolescents after they have left foster care. This type of research can also

be conducted with foster parents in order to find out how they deal with adolescents leaving the foster care which they have provided, and to find out from them what becomes of these children.

## **5.8. Conclusion**

This chapter has discussed, at length, the conclusions drawn from the findings of the study and the recommendations which have been made. The conclusions of the study have been drawn by answering the research questions of the study. The implications of the findings of the study for social work practice have been highlighted. The recommendations have been made in a manner which should leave room for critical responses, promote better service delivery from social workers and enable further research to enlarge upon the field of enquiry opened by this study.

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## **APPENDIXES**

### **APPENDIX 1. ETHICS RESEARCH CONFIDENTIALITY AND INFORMED CONSENT FORM**

I am a Social work Master's student at the university of Fort Hare conducting a research study on the experiences of adolescents preparing to leave foster care on the grounds of age in East London. You have been selected to be part of the research sample and you are kindly asked to assist by answering questions in the attached interview guide. The interview guide has been formulated to obtain evidence regarding the experiences of adolescents preparing to leave foster care on the grounds of age in East London.

Please understand that you are not being forced to take part in this study and the choice whether to participate or not is yours alone. However, we would really appreciate it if you do share your thoughts with us. If you choose not take part in answering these questions, you will not be affected in any way. If you agree to participate, you may stop me at any time and tell me that you don't want to go on with the interview. If you do this there will also be no penalties and you will NOT be prejudiced in ANY way. Confidentiality will be observed professionally.

I will not be recording your name anywhere on the questionnaire and no one will be able to link you to the answers you give. Only the researchers will have access to the unlinked information. The information will remain confidential and there will be no "come-backs" from the answers you give.

The interview will last around 25 minutes. I will be asking you a questions and ask that you are as open and honest as possible in answering these questions. Some questions may be of a personal and/or sensitive nature. I will be asking some questions that you may not have thought about before, and which also involve thinking about the past or the future. We know that you cannot be absolutely certain about the answers to these questions but we ask that you try to think about these questions. When it comes to answering questions there are no right and wrong answers. When we ask questions about the future we are not interested in what you think the best thing would be to do, but what you think would actually happen.

If possible, I would like to come back to you once i have completed our study to inform you and your community of what the results are and discuss the findings and proposals around the research.

**INFORMED CONSENT by Participant**

I hereby agree to participate in research regarding, the experiences of adolescents preparing to leave foster care on the grounds of age in East London. I understand that I am participating freely and without being forced in any way to do so. I also understand that I can stop this interview at any point should I not want to continue and that this decision will not in any way affect me negatively.

I understand that this is a research project whose purpose is not necessarily to benefit me personally.

I have received the telephone number of a person to contact should I need to speak about any issues which may arise in this interview.

I understand that this consent form will not be linked to the questionnaire, and that my answers will remain confidential.

I understand that if at all possible, feedback will be given to my community on the results of the completed research.

.....  
**Signature of participant**

**Date:**.....

I hereby agree to the tape recording of my participation in the study

.....  
**Signature of participant**

**Date:**.....

## **APPENDIX 2: INDEPTH- INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE.**

It should be noted that these questions were not asked in the order given below; it all depended on the responses given by the interviewees. In addition, the questions do not represent the exact manner in which they were asked.

### **INTERVIEW THEMES FOR CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE,**

**Age**.....

**Gender**.....

#### **Theme 1: Understanding of foster care**

1. How long have you been in foster care?
2. What do you understand by foster care?
3. Do you know the reasons for why you were committed to foster care?
4. How long do you think you should remain in foster care?

#### **Theme 2: Living in foster care**

5. Describe your relationship with your foster parent/parents?
6. What are the benefits of living in foster care?
7. What are the challenges that you have come across whilst in foster care?
8. Now that you are about to leave foster care what do you hope for?
9. What are your fears?

### **Theme 3: Social work intervention**

- 10 How were you prepared by social workers in order to be placed in foster care?
- 11 What kind of support/services are you receiving either from social workers?
- 12 What would you like social workers to do that they are not doing now?

### **Theme 4: information on family of origin**

13. Where are your family members/relatives and describe your relationship with them?
14. How often/when do you have contact with them?
15. Is there any possibility that you will rejoin your family members or relatives after turning 18 years?

### **Theme 5: Leaving foster care (turning 18)**

16. What are your plans after 18, have you discussed these plans with anyone and how did they receive it?

17. Are there positives that you can take from being in foster care and now that you are leaving foster care what are you looking forward to?

18. What would you like to happen to you during this time where you are about to leave foster care?

19. If you could change something about the foster care process, what would that be?

20. What would you say to children nearing 18 and living in foster care?

Thank you.

### **APPENDIX 3: INDEPTH- INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR SOCIAL WORKERS.**

It should be noted that these questions were not asked in the order given below; it all depended on the responses given by the interviewees. In addition, the questions do not represent the exact manner in which they were asked.

**Gender.....**

**Period at organization.....**

**Years dealing with foster children.....**

#### **Theme 1: Understanding the foster care process**

1. What are your views on the foster care process? (Explore negatives and positives)
2. What do you think are the critical stages in a child's life in foster care?
3. How is a child prepared in order to be placed in foster care?

#### **Theme 2: Children aging out of foster care.**

4. What challenges are there in dealing with children aging out of care?
5. What are the positives in the aging out of process in foster care?

**Theme 3: Social work intervention during the aging out period.**

6. Are there any social work services /programmes offered to children aging out of foster care?
7. What is the social workers role during the aging out period (16-18) ?

**Theme 4: Information on family of origin**

8. How are the family members or relatives involved during the period when the child is aging out of care?

**Theme 5: Leaving foster care (turning 18)**

9. What is done, when children in foster care have turned 18 and are no longer considered foster care children?
10. What recommendations/ suggestions can you make regarding the aging out process of children in foster care?

Thank you.

