



**UNIVERSITY OF GÖTEBORG**

*Department of Social Work*

*International Master of Science in Social Work*

## **REUNIFICATION – ‘A REALITY OR AN IMPOSSIBLE DREAM?’:**

***THE PERSPECTIVES OF SWEDISH CHILD CARE AND FOSTER FAMILY SOCIAL WORKERS***



*Illustrated by researchers*

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this qualitative study was to reflect upon the perspectives of Swedish childcare and foster family social workers about current reunification services rendered to the biological parents of children placed in foster care. The study examined how service delivery and environmental factors could actually affect the outcome of reunifying foster children with their biological parents.

Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted over the duration of one month among four childcare social workers, rendering services to the child and their biological parents and four foster family social workers rendering services to the foster parents. These social workers were employed in 4 out of 7 foster care agencies in the Gothenburg region. An additional interview was conducted with one biological parent whose children were previously removed and placed in foster care and after a duration of 1 ½ years were reunified back into her care. The data obtained from the interview with the biological parent were used for illustration purposes only as we could not draw any conclusions as this was an unrepresentative sample but provides insights for both the researchers and the readers. Data obtained from the interviews were analysed using qualitative interview analysis method as prescribed by Kvale (1996).

Findings from the study revealed that Swedish social workers have unbalanced views towards reunification and that there is a prevalence of difficulties experienced in the implementation of reunification service delivery in spite of ideal state policy. The study also affirmed that stable and quality contact between the child and parents while the child is placed in foster care increases the possibility of reunification. The study also confirmed that multiple factors affect the outcome of the reunification process and that the co-operation between all stakeholders is imperative in accomplishing the goal of reunification.

**Keywords:** Reunification, Foster care, co-operation, contact, attachment theory, systems and ecological perspective, post-reunification services.

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## **IV. ABBREVIATIONS**

UNCRC – United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

ICS – Integrated Children System

IFCO – International Foster Care Organization

SOL – Social Service Act

SWC – Social Welfare Committee

# CHAPTER 1

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Motivation for the Study

All around the world the population of children in foster care is growing at an alarming rate and Sweden is no exception. Statistics indicate that about 18 500 children were placed in public care outside their biological home in 2001 and about 73% (13 500) of these children were placed in foster homes (Socialtjänst 2002, p.7 cited in Höjer 2006). In Sweden, about 20 percent of children live in foster care for more than five years and some children remain in foster care throughout their childhood (SOU 2000, p. 7 cited in Höjer 2006) and some were placed in more than three placements before they turned 18 years old (8% out of 16000 children) (Vinnerlång et al., 2000, cited in Höjer 2006).

Though the children placed in foster care is not statistically of a large number, Höjer (2006) points out that the main concern is the prolonged duration of time the children stay in foster care. This is in direct opposition to the aim of foster care as an intervention method, as the intention is that the child will after some time be return to the biological parents. Therefore it is evident from the above statistics that foster care has become the principal placement of choice for children in need for care in the public care system in Sweden. This phenomenon is in contrast with the primary goal of the child welfare system, which states that reunifying children placed in foster care with their biological parents is the main objective of service delivery. Currently reunification takes longer to happen, as it is suppose not to.

The European Court decided in 1989 "the right of a child and its biological parents to be together is a fundamental part of family life" (cited by Sverne, 1993:311). However, there is a need of many children to be cared for in a safe environment with an alternative foster family which may not be possible in their biological parents. The most important issue of the contemporary foster care programs is that despite the fact that these children get quality care in the foster family they are often deprived from their rights of being reunified with their biological family and are living in increasing anxiety and they lack a quality relationship with their biological parents. To act in the best interest of the child is a paramount principle when social workers intervene in the lives of children and their families. Sverne (1993:300) emphasizes the importance for children to have contact with their parents even if they are unable to adequately care for them due to the emotional bond that exist between the parents and their children.

From personal experiences in the field of foster care and child protection, we as social workers tend to focus too much on ensuring a stable and nurturing foster care environment that little time is spent rendering a service to the biological family to correct problems that existed in the family prior to removal of the child in order to facilitate family reunification. This view is supported by Bagdasaryan (2005: 616) who states that there "appeared to be a lack of attention of services provided to the biological families of children placed in foster care". The author supported her argument by referring to the findings of previous studies, suggesting that "not only were too many children entering the foster care system before other alternatives had been sufficiently explored but also that the biological families of these children received little support or information about what was requested of them in order to maintain or regain custody of their children" (Bagdasaryan, 2005:616).

Based on a thorough research review, the exploration of the effectiveness of foster care reunification services offered to the biological parents is imperative. Therefore the study aims to examine the types of services provided to biological family to enhance reunification and find out what are the strengths and possible weaknesses in the existing family reunification program facilitated by professional social workers during a foster care placement based on the perspectives of Swedish Social Workers. Another objective would be to examine the type of services offered to the biological family after reunification in order to monitor and sustain the family as a preventative measure avoiding reentry back into the foster care system.

By studying the process of reunification services rendered to biological parents before and after reunification, will allow us to determine whether the basis of the problem causing lengthy stays coupled with re-entry back into foster care system lies on an organizational or personal level or both, and it is hoped that we will be able to make suggestions derived from the results of the study, where changes need to be made in order to address the problem more adequately. The results of the study would not only be beneficial to individual social workers, but may also assist in the facilitation of positive change on family and organizational levels.

## **1.2 The Problem Area**

The problem area of this study is to examine the implementation of family reunification services in order to promote reunification and to prevent reentry back into the foster care system from the perspectives of Swedish professionals.

## **1.3 Research questions**

Gilbert (2001) states that a clearly formulated research question is of utmost importance as it guides and strengthens the focus of the study and thereby avoiding drifting off from central issues. In order to fully attain the purpose of the study the research will raise the following questions:

- What is family reunification and how is it being implemented in Swedish legislation?
- What criteria are needed for re-unification to take place?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of family reunification services in terms of family needs, service delivery and its outcomes?
- What type of services is being rendered to the biological family after children has been placed back, in order to sustain the family and to prevent reentry back into the system?

## **1.4 Definitions of terminology**

For the better understanding of the core concepts which we have discussed and presented throughout this study, the following terminology are defined and explained.

- 1.4.1. Foster care** – Refers to the temporary out-of home care for children who can no longer remain within the care of their biological parents. The International Foster Care Organization (IFCO) defines foster care as temporary or alternative family care. The

period of placement can vary in different countries and is generally known as ‘pre-adoption care; weekend care or vacation care; respite care for handicapped children; care of a group of children in one family; or long-term care for a child who cannot be adopted’ (IFCO, Foster care guidelines, cited in [www.crin.org](http://www.crin.org)).

- 1.4.2.** *Family reunification* – Family reunification denotes to the reunion of foster children back into the biological family after certain duration in public care either in foster care or in institutional care. Family reunification is broadly defined as the systematic process of reuniting children in public care with their biological families with the aims of helping maintain reconnection and reunion—full entry and membership to the biological family (Pine, Warsh, & Maluccio, 1993 cited in [www.cwla.org](http://www.cwla.org)).
- 1.4.3.** *Contact* – For the purpose of this study this term refers to regular visitation between the child and the biological parent while the child is placed in foster care. The term contact may either be physical visitation or the emotional connection through other means, pictures and memories between the parents and the child. Contact is viewed as an important way of identifying the reality of the biological family of the child placed in foster care and psychological stimulation of children to accept the ‘dual identities’ of both the foster family and the biological parents to promote a ‘positive relationship’ (Schofield and Beek, 2006).
- 1.4.4.** *Childcare social workers* – For the purpose of this study, in Sweden, a child care social worker refers to the person responsible for rendering a service to the child and the biological parents based on their needs.
- 1.4.5.** *Foster family social worker* – In Sweden, this term refers to the social worker responsible for rendering services to the foster family for the period while the child is placed in foster care. The responsibility can vary from recruitment of foster families to services to foster family and the child.
- 1.4.6.** *Re-entry* – This term refers to a child who previously had been placed in the care system and been placed back into the care of the biological parents but due to problems re-occurring in the family, the child had been placed back into care system again. Re-entry is also known as recidivism, in the case where the child leaves the foster care system to be reunified with his/her biological family or legal custodians but later returns to the foster care system again due to breakdown within the family (Sphere Institute, [www.sphereinstitute.org](http://www.sphereinstitute.org)).
- 1.4.7.** *Foster family* – The family who fulfils the role as a substitute parent by caring and looking after a child until being placed back into the care of the biological parents. IFCO defined foster care or the foster family as the adults who provide emotional, physical care and support to nurture the children placed in their care on a temporary basis. The appointment of the foster family is planned and services to children are goal-directed (IFCO, Foster Care Guidelines, cited in [www.crin.org](http://www.crin.org)).
- 1.4.8.** *The biological parent* – The biological parents are often termed as the family of origin of the child or the persons who give birth to a child or who have sole custody of the child. IFCO defined the biological parent as the family into which the child is born which also means either the parents are together, single or divorced (IFCO, Foster care guidelines, cited in [www.crin.org](http://www.crin.org)).



## **1.5 Structure of the report**

In order to formally present the study, the report has been divided into seven chapters:

Chapter two provides a brief discussion of the organization of foster care in Sweden with the focus on the current legislation pertaining to foster care and more specifically the reunification process. This chapter also includes a section of the organization of foster care and provision of child protection in our countries of origin South Africa and Nepal.

In chapter three we present a short overview of the theoretical framework set out for this study with special reference to the model of 'The integrated children's system' the tool used in Sweden to assess the need of a child and the possibility of reunification.

In Chapter four we present a discussion of previous research done in the field of foster care and reunification. Chapter five focuses on the methodology of the study. Here we present a discussion on the choice of method, as well as the practical implementation thereof. Ethical considerations of the study also form part of this chapter.

Chapter six contains a discussion of empirical data obtained as well as an analysis of the results derived with the support of previous literature combined with the systems theory, the ecological perspective as well as the attachment theory. In our last chapter (7) we present an overall discussion of the results with concluding remarks with regards to the outcome of the study.

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## **CHAPTER 2**

### **BACKGROUND: THE ORGANIZATION OF FOSTER CARE IN SWEDEN**

In this chapter we present a brief overview of the organization of foster care in Sweden in terms of legislation pertaining to foster care, with a special focus on reunification. The chapter also provides a short global overview of the organization of foster care and provision of child protection in South Africa and Nepal.

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#### **2.1 Foster care in Sweden**

Sweden has a practice and notion of placing children in foster families instead of institutions when the biological parents fail to fulfil the basic needs of the child or the malfunction within the family (Höjer 2006). The organization of foster care in Sweden is legalized and implemented by local authorities. Local authorities are the county councils and municipalities. Sweden has 21 county councils and 289 municipalities and are self-governed by the elected body of politicians.

Legal provision of public care for children removed from their biological parent's dates back to 1924 empowering the Child Welfare Committees in the municipalities to administer and enforce this law of taking the children in public care against the will of parents (Lundström 1993, cited in Höjer 2006). Presently, Sweden does not have any special Children act but the needs and rights of the children are guaranteed through two laws: one is called Social Service Act which provides framework for different kinds of social support and the other is called the Care of Young Persons Act which regulates the compulsory care of young people without the consent of parents or children (Hessle and Vinnerljung 2000 cited in Höjer 2006) which we have discussed below. Foster care is regulated through these laws and unlike many other countries care of these children out of the care of their parents needs a formal consent from the child welfare authorities and private and unregulated foster care is illegal in Sweden. (Hessle & Vinnerljung 2000 cited in Höjer 2004).

The care of children in institution and private care is discouraged in Swedish legislation (Höjer 2006). The Swedish legislation requires the local authorities to review the care of children placed in foster care every six months and the main assumption of the legislation is that 'every parent can be rehabilitated' (Barth 1992:39 cited in Andersson 1999:175) and the main aim is reunification since Swedish legislation does not allow even the long term foster care to be permanent.

#### **2.2 Swedish Legislation**

As discussed above, Swedish legislation pertaining to the care of young children is regulated by the Social Service Act (SOL) 1982, which is the 'framework law' for regulating several areas of social support and interventions. The care of young persons-special provisions-Act (LVU 1993) which is a complementing special bill to Social Service Act, regulates compulsory care of children without the parents or children's consent if the child's

development is in danger. Hessle and Vinnerljung (1999) stated that the Swedish legislation establishes the right of children to care, security, good upbringing and respect of their individuality. For the purpose of our research, we have discussed the SOL, LVU and UNCRC in terms of family support of the children in need of care, contact between the child and the parents, care provision and right to participation of the child in decision making in such care placements.

### **2.2.1. Swedish Legislation related to family support and prevention**

According to Hessle and Vinnerljung (1999) local authorities are the primary responsible body to guarantee the support and care of children. Mandated by the law, social authorities are forced to create a safe and favourable environment for children by assisting families and following up family conditions which would otherwise be unfavourable to the wellbeing of the children and their development (Ibid). The law necessitates the provision of substitute care for the child outside the family if needed as the last resort when all other alternatives to safeguard the child within the family had failed.

Hessle and Vinnerljung (1999) discuss family support in light of the concept of prevention. Prevention is of primary concern for Swedish child Welfare policy. Therefore the policy advocates enhancing the best available services to families through regular support by the social workers before they become an actual 'client' in the care system. The authors further highlighted that these types of preventive actions are facilitated through "Social support and in-home treatment". The widely admired part of the Swedish policy is their success in prevention before the problem gets worse.

Section 12 of SOL regulates Social Welfare Committees to act to guarantee the development and care of children in a safe environment by enhancing the cooperation with the families as well as the provision much needed support to the family and the child to prevent abuse and living conditions in the environments which are detrimental to the development of children, keeping in mind the best interest of the child. As Hessle and Vinnerljung (1999) state, the main emphasis in Swedish Child Welfare is on broad 'social support and services' rather than on the protection of the child in particular which can be seen in the ideology of the SOL.

### **2.2.2 Swedish legislation on the importance of contact between child in care and biological parents**

Fuelled by the political movement of 1997, the current care legislation shifted from distant foster care to that of emphasizing the importance of developing a care plan for each child, keeping in mind the possibility of immediate relatives or substitute care to avoid the possible disturbance in the contact between the child and family (Hessle and Vinnerljung 1999). This view is supported in Section 25 of SOL which provides the right of the child to be cared for in close relation with the biological parents by ensuring that the children will not be placed in permanent care or a family to which the child does not belong to. Such placements require the permission from the Social Welfare Committee prior to the appointment of custodians for the child (Thelen, 1994).

Sections 28, 30, & 50 of SOL specifically requires the committee to follow up every six months the necessity of placement in foster care aiming as much as possible to reunite the child back into the biological parents (Thelen, 1994). Thus contact with the birth parents has

been legalized and the social welfare committee has the responsibility to fulfil the needs of the child to reunite with his/her biological parents. Baddredine and Idström stated that the main aim of the legislation is that the child has the highest possibility to be reunited as soon as possible after the child was placed in foster care (cited in Thelen, 1994). SOL prioritize the importance of a close relation between the biological parents or siblings while the child is in foster care so that the child will not be prevented from the rights of family identity and preventing the children from ‘creating a dream picture of their earlier life’ (Ibid).

In the case of the rights of children and parents to be in close contact, Sverne (1999:309) recounted the decision of the European Court stating that ‘ties between members of the family and the prospects of their successful reunification would be weakened if impediments are placed in the way of their having easy and regular access to the each other.’ He further insists on Swedish authorities having to acknowledge the importance of a child’s access to their biological parents and the importance of viewing public care as temporary and the last resort.

### **2.2.3 Swedish Legislation related to care of children out of their biological home**

The care of children other than in their own families such as foster care, adoption, contact families etc are all regulated and needs prior consent from the authorities before care placement. Hessle and Vinnerljung (1999) also argue that the legal parameter for the protection of children in care without their biological parents is rather strict in Sweden. The custodian of the child or say foster children needs to declare their character, financial as well as willingness to be inspected annually in front of the local authorities. Authorities possess the legal rights to prevent any adults or carers such as foster caretakers or day caretakers from taking care of the children if the environment is unfavourable to the development of the child (Ibid).

Section 10 of SOL states that the social welfare committees (SWCs) may appoint particular persons or families to help the individual and his next of kin in personal affairs if the individual requests or consents to such an arrangement ([www.socialstyrelsen.se](http://www.socialstyrelsen.se)). In terms of care of young persons in compulsory situation, LVU regulates that authorities may impose thorough interventions under the following circumstances such as abuse of children, insufficient care and neglect, behaviour dysfunction and delinquencies of the children, threatening environment and substance abuse of either parent or children, lead to placement in care without parental consent( [www.socialstyrelsen.se](http://www.socialstyrelsen.se)).

Vinnerljung (1996a, cited in Hessle and Vinnerljung 1999) opines that there has been an ideological tradition of professionals and social workers who prefer long term care, even though a foster placement in Sweden is temporary and short term by legal definition.

### **2.2.4 United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)**

Swedish government ratified UNCRC on 29 June 1990 and strongly promotes the rights of the child in all spheres of intervention. UNCRC provides legal guidelines for the social workers while attempting to intervene in order to fulfil the needs of the child in foster care or care within biological families. Article 3(1) of the convention states, the child’s best interest shall be of primary consideration in all situations (UNCRC, 1989).

Regarding the rights of the child to identity, article 9, part 1 states, ‘ State parties shall ensure that a child shall not be separated from his or her parents against their will, except when competent authorities subject to judicial review determine, in accordance with applicable law and procedures, that such separation is necessary for the best interests of the child.’ Part of the same article 3 states, ‘parties shall respect the right of the child who is separated from one or both parents to maintain personal relations and direct contact with both parents on a regular basis, except if it is contrary to the child’s best interests’ (Ibid).

Regarding the right to participation of the child, Article 12 part 1 states that the state parties have responsibility to respect the voice of the children who is capable of forming his or her own views and respect the right of children to express those views freely in all matters affecting them as well as the views of the child must be given proper weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child (UNCRC, 1989). Part 2 of the same article, states ‘the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly or through representative or an appropriate body (Ibid).

## **2.3 COMPARATIVE CARE SYSTEMS IN OTHER COUNTRIES**

In the following section we present a brief picture of how foster care (with the focus on family reunification services) is organized in our countries of origin, South Africa and Nepal.

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### **2.3.1 South Africa**

In South Africa, within the public child welfare system, foster care is considered to be the most preferred form of substitute care for children who cannot remain with their biological parents. According to a government document ([www.doj.gov.za](http://www.doj.gov.za)) released ‘this reflects the belief that the family is normally the environment most suited to the healthy growth and development of the child (p1, *ibid*). In South Africa, foster care has become the primary care method as thousands of children are being placed in ‘court-ordered’ foster care. There is however a flipside as it is uncertain whether this form of care as provided for in the ‘Child Care Act (1983) can sufficiently deal with the country’s changing needs (p1) (*Ibid*). South African legislation upholds the UN convention on the rights of the child, as the main emphasis in child and family welfare is on child protection. "The Child Care Act" is the most important preventative and legislative measurement ensuring that the best interests of children are protected and are of primary consideration when intervening in familial problems.

In South African context, social workers interventions are regulated by legal mandate found in the Child care Act (1983). Therefore the Child Care Act determines the powers and duties with which social workers are endowed. In situations of severe family breakdown due to poverty and unemployment resulting for example in physical abuse or sexual exploitation as an extra income social workers intervene on a statutory level by enforcing government legislation of child protection and placing the children in foster care. Government provides social assistance called the foster care grant to be utilised to provide in the foster child’s daily needs.

The foster care system in South Africa experienced several challenges due to an enormous increase in the number of children placed in public care, coupled with considerable changes in the policy framework guiding foster care practice ([www.doj.gov.za](http://www.doj.gov.za)). Difficulties experienced on organizational level such as a lack of personnel and high case loads are barriers in providing services to needy families in a satisfactory, accessible and appropriate manner.

Statistics projects that by the year 2015 about 10% of the total South African population will be orphaned. Currently there are roughly 50 000 children placed in court-ordered foster care in South Africa, and social workers are having trouble in finding adequate foster families ([www.doj.gov.za](http://www.doj.gov.za)). In 2003 it was estimated that 785, 000 orphans were entitled for foster care placement in South Africa (Ibid). A report issued by government indicated that four out of five families will need to take a child 'unrelated' to them in order to cope with the increasing number of AIDS orphans (Ibid). This is a most impossible scenario and one which would not be suitable for all the children concerned.

Within the South African society, 'the use of the foster care system as an *'income maintenance'* measurement to assist families who care for the children of relatives has become a well established child welfare practice' (p3) ([www.doj.gov.za](http://www.doj.gov.za)). A government report stated that this has made kinship care a feasible alternative for many families who would otherwise have struggled to care for their children on their own (Ibid). As a survival strategy, many impoverished families with no access to state financial assistance, as the child support grant are only available to children younger than seven years, tend to place their children in foster care with extended family members instead of having them children removed as they cannot adequately provide in the needs of their children. As a result it has placed a burden on the formal foster care system in terms of 'legal requirements for ongoing social work services and regulates reporting obligations' ([www.doj.gov.za](http://www.doj.gov.za)).

The above is a clear indication of creating an attitude of increasing dependency on the state. In response to the dire economic circumstances of families, South African social workers are prompted to follow a holistic intervention path with clients in line with governments "Developmental Social Welfare policy". Therefore service delivery should include job skills training and capacity building programmes for unemployed parents and caregivers in order to help families and communities to develop their capacity to meet their own needs and take care of, develop and protect their children. (CTCW, Annual report: 2005).

Similar to Sweden, the goal of foster care is temporary and for agencies to reunite children with their biological families, however success appears to be limited. In addition to that resources available for reunification services are inadequate and neglect, abuse and abandonment are seldom resolved in such a way that those children can return to their biological parents ([www.doj.gov.za](http://www.doj.gov.za)).

There is, therefore, a need in South Africa to develop suitable interventions under the foster care reunification service delivery to support biological families in order to address problems that existed prior to removal for them to resume their parental responsibilities and to take care of their children. By focusing on that we would also be able to provide a much needed opportunity in the foster care system for those orphaned by AIDS and others where the service is much more needed.

### 2.3.2 Nepal

The organized way of care of orphan children and children without parental care in Nepal dates back to the 100 years in the form of residential orphanages. Such orphanages were responsible to provide care of the infant orphans and children. Nowadays, Nepal has more than 335 child homes according to the study of New Era Nepal (New Era, 2005). Currently child care homes are the most popular form of public or voluntary child care system in Nepal. According to the study of New Era, there are more than 10 000 children living in 335 child homes run by non governmental and voluntary organizations (New Era, 2005). The study also suggests that the children in child homes lack proper care and lack parental attachment as there is one caretaker assigned to per 10 children in such child homes (New Era, 2005). Children need a caring and protective environment for normal upbringing. Though in Nepal, the main issue is of the survival of children and other concerns are overshadowed, as it is of course the prime responsibility of the caregivers to ensure the development of children in healthy and stimulating environment. However one can imagine the physical and psychological growth of a child where one caregiver has to take care of more than 10 children.

Right after the ratification of UN convention on the right of Child (UNCRC) by Nepal in 1990 and the enforcement of Child Act in 1991, the rights of children and the care of orphaned and children without parental care in such public care have started being regulated. The Ministry of Women Children and Social Welfare acts as the government body to look after the social welfare activities particularly about women and children by providing operational guidelines for the child homes. The Central Child Welfare Board, which has District Child Welfare Board in 75 districts in Nepal, looks after the situation of children in such child homes and other child protection related issues. There are a few government run public child welfare homes including Nepal Children's Organization (NCO) which takes care of over 600 children 12 orphanage homes (NCO homepage, [www.nconepal.org](http://www.nconepal.org)).

Chapter 3, section 22 of the Child Act of Nepal states that the Child Welfare Officer is responsible for the appointment of guardians for the children who are orphan. The law further says that the child must be given under the guardianship of immediate heir of the child. Though chapter 3 (31) of the Child Act specifically necessitates the government to provide remuneration to the guardian, there has not been any regulation or practice on how much the compensation for the guardian be. However the property whatever is left in the name of the child after his/her parents are deceased can be used by the legal guardian. If there is no one ready to take guardianship of the child, the Child Welfare Officer decides to place them in the custody of public child welfare homes or homes run by non governmental organizations (Child Act of Nepal 1991, cited in [www.mowcsw.gov.np](http://www.mowcsw.gov.np)).

Though the government has promulgated enough regulatory grounds for such child homes to protect vulnerable children, orphans and street children, the government bodies such as Central and District Child Welfare Boards and Administration offices lack regular monitoring and proper legal appointment of custodian of children in private child homes. For example, according to the Study of New Era (2005), a child can stay as minimum as 1 year to until the age of 18 in such child homes. Such stay decision is not regulated by District Child Welfare Boards of Nepal.

Interestingly, according to the Child Act of Nepal 1991, Chapter 3(8), there is a strict provision of contact between mother and the child or child and father if the parents are divorced or separated due to various social reasons. The law also requires that the child should have regular contact with the natural parents or relatives if the child is legally adopted if the child ([www.mowcsw.gov.np](http://www.mowcsw.gov.np))

Amid a rapid institutionalization of children in Nepal as a public care, the Foster Care is not yet known phenomena in Nepal nor there exist any legal form to regulate such care system except regulatory cross border adoption. Due to the nature of extended family, close relatives, grandparents or siblings are responsible to take care of the children who are orphaned or out of the parental care. Inability to provide for the children makes families or relatives to let the child go to orphanages in spite of family disgrace, institution has become the favourable place in contemporary child care system in Nepal.

Nepal is one of the poorest countries in the world and social assistance to children and laws relating to the protection of children is very weak. In 2006 alone, there were more than 8000 children being orphaned, more than 40000 children are displaced from their natural parents and more than 5000 children living on the street due to conflict, poverty and social reasons (CWIN, [www.cwin.org.np](http://www.cwin.org.np)). The need of these orphans, displaced and street children to get protection is in high need. As the study of New Era suggested, many children living in child homes are facing psychological problems and have contacted their family or relatives less than once in 12 months (New Era, 2005); one can easily conclude that there is a growing lack of humane treatment of these children in child homes. We can also say that the normal upbringing of these children in child homes has been affected due to the stigmatization. This brings us to conclude that these children are in need of being cared in a normal family circumstance of their own or substitute family.

Hence, there is a growing need placing these children in foster family. Nepal does not have government-regulated family support of such children. Care of children in the legal custody of foster family could be the best alternative to protect the family rights of children and to cater safer upbringing. A legally defined public care plan of these children in the foster family is primarily call of the day in Nepal as children in child homes are being caged, stigmatized and are prone to low self-esteem. The children in child homes loss family care, psychological attachment to their own biological families and they are bound to loss normal contact with their family and siblings.



## CHAPTER 3

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this chapter we present a discussion of the theories of Attachment, the systems theory and the ecological perspective and the applicability of the use of these theories for the problem area under discussion. We also give a brief discussion of the Integrate Children's System, the blueprint for service delivery in terms of the reunification process in Sweden.

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#### 3.1 Theoretical framework

##### 3.1.1 The systems theory

The systems theory had been dominating the social work field on both theoretical and practice level for decades. Ludwig Von Bertalanffy who is regarded as the founder of the general systems theory, argued that certain general ideas could have relevance across a broad spectrum. Therefore the systems theory proposes that all organisms are systems, composed of subsystems, and are in turn part of super-systems (Payne, 1996:137). For example the foster child is part of a family, and he/she interacts within certain groups, where these subsystems are all part of the whole of society. Preton-Shoot & Aquass compliments this point of view as they see the systems theory as a framework for the analyses of complex reciprocal connections and interrelationship that exists between or among elements that make up the whole system and other mutually influencing factors in the mutual setting and wider environment, known as the subsystems (cited in Treveithick, 2005:278).

Von Bertalanffy and other researchers in this field view the following as core elements of the systems theory (Payne 1996; Evans & Kearney 1996 & Turner 1986):

- Providing a shift away from the 'focus on the person in isolation to the person in context'.
- Change in one part of the System would result in change in all others parts as well.
- The individual 'exist in a web of relationships'
- 'People both influenced and are influenced by the systems with which they interact'.
- The behaviour of people needs to be understood in the context of these interactive relationships.
- Human beings are viewed as open systems as they maintain themselves in steady states.

The System theory is basically concerned with problems, relationships, structures, and interdependence of various parts of the system. The main concept in this theory is 'system' which essentially means regularly interacting yet interdependent group of items forming a whole. This theory has a comprehensive view of phenomenon. It incorporates social and psychological elements of practice. It is therefore applicable to the delivery of family reunification services. The reunification service delivery process is here being regarded as a system with component parts – the social workers (change agents), parents (target systems) and children (client system). The change agents (social workers) have to focus on the

biological parents networks which are engrossed in the person's daily living (Payne, 1996:150). The change agent (social worker) enables the target system (biological parents) to establish contact with their children placed in foster care as well as offering them assistance in addressing problems that existed prior to removal in order to be able to adequately care for the child concerned as well as providing support services after reunification in order to prevent re-entry back into the system (Payne, 1996:151).

The systems theory offers a context for the interaction between all the parties involved in the process of reunification. The social worker can be seen as the change agent, the child placed in foster care as the client system, the biological parents as the target system and the reunification process and resources as the action system. We thereby look at the different agents in the process of implementing the family reunification process.

### **3.1.2 The ecological perspective**

An ecological perspective leads to the better understanding of human behaviour and social functioning. In relation to foster care service delivery, with not just the foster family but as well as the biological family, it is obviously important to understand what factors in the social environment have positive and negative influences on parenting and the development of children in order to work towards possible reintegration. It would therefore be of utmost importance to examine the ways in which social networks can influence the quality of family life and outcomes for children.

The systemic and ecological perspective derives from the perception that a system consists of parts and that change in one part will bring about changes in the other parts as well (Payne, 1996). Within these perspectives four key domains (parts) of environmental interactions for individuals and families are identified, which include the situation, micro, meso and macro levels (Turner, 1986:607). According to Turner the first domain, the 'situation' is seen as the actual situations that we come across and form our own perceptions about the situation and in turn we develop specific strategies to cope with them. The micro-system is the closest environment to the individual which includes experiences of the family, school, work, colleagues, groups and it has a direct influence on the person. The meso-level on the other hand is 'that part of the environment that in some way or other influences and determines the character and functioning of the micro-environment' (Magnusson & Allen, 1983, cited in Turner, 1986:608). The meso-systems are the relationships between major groups that effects the daily life of individuals. Finally, the macro-level is the most common and involves the physical, social, cultural, economic and political arenas of the larger society in which individuals grow up (Turner, 1986). The author emphasizes the importance of social workers taking into account of how these systems in the environment affect the development and behaviour of individuals and that it is indeed a person's interaction with the environment that has the most influence.

For the purpose of this study we will examine how these different systems within a family's environment can affect the outcomes for family reunification. A research study has (1996 cited in Jack 1997:116) that: 'The most important condition for success was found always to be the quality of the relationship between a child's family and the responsible professional...Taken as a whole, the findings did not suggest any need for a wholesale restructuring of the child protection process.' Therefore a cooperative relationship between

the social worker (change system) and the biological parents (target system) could be seen as vital to effectively working towards reunification.

### **3.1.3 Attachment Theory**

Attachment theory originates from John Bowlby's study of children and their emotional development. Bowlby's perspective and inquiry of attachment theory became wider to understand the psychological behaviour and development of human beings in general and children in particular after his research named 'The making and breaking of affectional bonds' (cited in Howe 1995:46).

Further, his work was complemented by the work of ethologists in the early 1950s about the similarity of attachment behaviour of animals and human being. The attachment theory is sustained thus also by the science of ethology which stimulated fresh answers to the old questions about why and how human babies become attached to certain adult figures.

John Bowlby while working together with James Robertson recognized and described the pain that children experience when they were separated from their parents. He observed the long term effects such as delinquent behaviour in children due to the maternal deprivation. This primarily stimulated the application of attachment theory in Child and family social work. Attachment Theory is further applied in social work by the writings of David Howe. His writing gave further explanation to the attachment behaviour of certain children raised in institutions and the attachment problem caused by long term separation of children from biological families and placed in foster care.

Howe (1995:45) argued that a quality relationship is important to develop the social competence of the child. He further explained that if the child does not get the sufficient attachment from his mother, he is involved into social network and seeks attachment feature in the family such as father, sibling or grandparents (Ibid). The basic idea of the attachment theory is as propounded by Bowlby is that, children have a natural tendency to keep closeness with a mother figure. Rutter (1991 cited in Howe 1995:46) further argued that this triggers to an attachment relationship and the quality of this relationship with network figures serves the basis of later relationship of the child.

#### **3.1.3.1 Core Components of the Attachment theory**

##### ***a) Attachment behaviour***

According to Weiss (1991 cited in Howe 1995:49), attachment behaviour is shown by the child when he/she faces the stress of extreme physical needs due to hunger, pain illness and fatigue or environmental threats or relationship problem such as immediate long term separation of child from mother. The author further identifies three basic characteristics, which are associated with attachment behaviour of the child viz. Proximity seeking, secure base effect and Separation protest which builds the main ideas of attachment theory (Ibid).

##### ***b) Proximity Seeking***

The characteristic of proximity seeking is related to the child's attempt to remain in the protective range of his or her parents. Bowlby argues that children and infants have a

'biological drive to seek proximity to protective adults to survive danger' (Schofield and Beek, 2006). Proximity seeking can be the signals to the caregivers or parents by children through crying, protest, clinging and vocalizations etc due to the probable threats the child might be feeling or experience (ibid). Continuous failing of the caregiver to respond positively to the proximity seeking of the child may result in the child shift of seeking an alternative secure base since the goal of such proximity drive of the child is to have a secure base (Schofield and Beek, 2006). This further provides frameworks for our research about the attachment problem between the biological parent and the child due to the dysfunction of the parents to fulfil the needs of the child.

### ***c) Secure base***

The characteristics of the secure base effect is observed when the child feels secure with the attachment figure. Ainsworth and Witting (1969 cited in Howe 1995:54) stated that 'the mother to whom the child is attached provides a secure base: a place of safety, comfort and warmth when anxiety levels rise.' The authors (1969 cited in Howe 1995) argued that attachment is one of the genetically rooted behaviours programmed to engage the child with the social and physical world whilst ensuring his or her safety. So it becomes important for the child to recognize himself/herself to his/her biological or substitute social networks such as siblings or grandparents to fully develop his/her secure base. Ainsworth (1978 as cited in Howe 1995) noted that a secure base child posses the capacity to use attachment figure with the feeling of security and comfort. The child feels reliable upon the attachment figure and develops the positive attachment and is liberated from the fear of danger and anxiety. This interaction between the child and the attachment figure of the child forms the secure base which leads to the creation of "safe haven" for the child. This component provides us with explanation to why positive attachment and quality contact between the parent and the child in foster care is imperative for reunification.

### ***d) The Separation Protest***

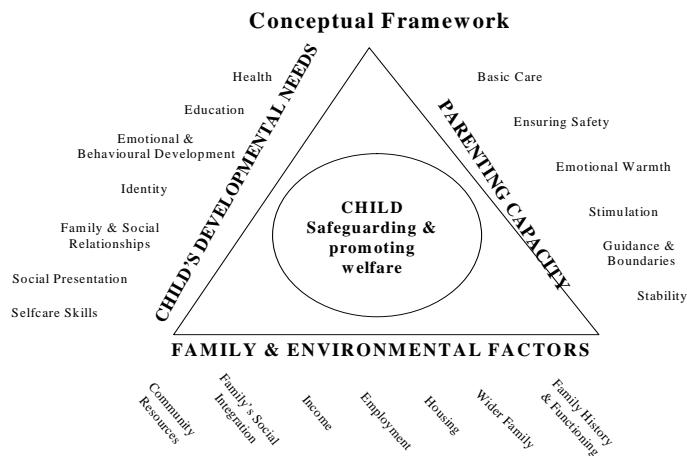
'*The Separation Protest*' is observed when the child faces the threat to the regular access of the attachment figure and an act of protest and attempts to fight against the separation.

The Attachment theory guides us by providing frameworks to understand the psychological developmental consequences for children due to the lack satisfactory relationships and their suffering from poor attachment experiences (Howe 1995: 45). The attachment theory is used in our research to explain why the child social workers should work on promoting and upholding the contacts between biological parents while being placed in foster care and how these attachments and quality of relationships between the biological parents and the child placed in foster care are prioritised by child social workers before and after the reunification of the child back to the family of origin. The application of the attachment theory is also aimed at explaining why the child can not form a secure base within the biological families or foster families which prevent successful reintegration. Application of this theory is important in a sense that it has provided the social workers and professionals to assess the care plan for the children in foster home and help children and biological parents to 'deal with the impact of maltreatment, separation and loss'(Schofield and Beek, 2006:421).

### 3.1.4 The ‘integrated children’s system

Sweden adopted the ‘integrated children’s system’ from Britain as a blueprint for service delivering within the foster care system. The National board of Health worked vigorously towards the successful implementation of this system in order to ensure that the child’s needs are met and that services are delivered in uniformity with the best interest of the child.

**Figure 1: The Integrated children’s system**



The integrated children’s system (ICS) has one principle goal. It is aimed to improve the outcomes for children in need of protection as described in the British Children’s Act (1989). It was therefore developed to provide professionals in the field of child protection with a ‘conceptual framework’ of how to deal with these issues in practice by offering them the necessary support in order to conduct ‘assessments’, ‘planning’, ‘intervention’ and ‘review’ ([www.everychildmatters.gov.uk](http://www.everychildmatters.gov.uk)).

In Sweden, the ICS are used by social workers as a guideline when making decisions in terms of reunification taking into consideration the needs of the child, the family. This is done as the integrated children’s system is ‘based on an understanding of children's developmental needs in the context of parental capacity and wider family and environmental factors’. ([www.everychildmatters.gov.uk](http://www.everychildmatters.gov.uk)). This integrated system operates consistent with the law (SOL and LVU) with an emphasis on the best interests of the child (Ibid).

The following aims are set out by the integrated children’s system:

- ‘All practitioners and managers, responsible for children in need, should work in accordance with the ICS conceptual framework, from case referral to case closure’.
- Assessments of children in need should be completed with the necessary detail and within the required timescales’.
- Case-based information should be aggregated through computer systems into management information, required for day-to-day service planning.
- All practitioners should feel they are supported in their work by working directly with ICT systems that support ICS’ ([www.everychildmatters.gov.uk](http://www.everychildmatters.gov.uk)).

## CHAPTER 4

### LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter we present a brief overview of previous research on reunification with special reference to the importance of contact, co-operative relationships between all stakeholders as well as services offered to biological parents.

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#### 4.1 Earlier studies on Reunification

According to a committee report of the Swedish government (SOU 1997:116) Swedish research failed to pay sufficient attention to the situation of children placed in long-term foster care (cited in Andersson, 1999:175). Andersson (1999:176) states that as a country, Sweden emphasizes the importance of parental contact and the reunification of children in foster care but contrary to this the Swedish foster care agencies were highly criticized by local and national authorities for not prioritizing the need for on-going contact with the biological parents, for not monitoring the progress of foster children and providing them with much needed 'personal support', for not offering sufficient support and training to foster parents and most important in this study, the failure to rehabilitate the biological parents with the focus to work towards reunification.

Though reunification appears to be a catch words among the social workers working both with foster children and biological families, it is often a very difficult and time consuming process. Various researchers have identified the prevalence of factors that prevents reunification of foster children to biological families. On the other hand, as Miller (et al 2004) notes although reunification of foster children to biological parents is the main objective of child welfare, many children once reunited to biological parents re-enter the care system 'owing to ongoing abusive or neglectful environment.' The study of Miller (et al 2004) examine post reunification variables regarding parent characteristics, child characteristics, parent service utilization, child service utilization, family environment and neighbourhood environment as they relate to reunification failure. Ainsworth and Maluccio (2003) discuss the drug use by parents as a barrier and challenge of family reunification of foster children.

The study of Petr and Entriken (1995) examine the difficulties existing in programs, which are intended to reunite the children in state custody with their families. A Case management project conducted during April 1992 to March 1993 among children in the state custody and their case workers in the urban county of Midwestern state on USA revealed that there is prevalence of systemic barriers to reunification (Petr and Entriken, 1995). It was argued that the system pays little attention to reunification goals, and often the placement of the youth is far from families. The system put much emphasis on the correction and rehabilitation of youths but lacks the involvement of family in reunification (ibid). This study triggers, not entirely but partly with the case of foster children reunification cases, that foster family social workers often tend to forget the biological family and their involvement in successful reunification once the child is removed from the family.

A Study conducted by Fuller (2005) highlights important questions, which are best, answered before the reunification for the safety of the child in the home environment such as: are the issues that prompted the child's removal under control? If secondary issues have developed during the child's stay in substitute care, are they under control? Most importantly, will these issues remain under control if the child is reintroduced into the home environment? Fuller (2005) finds certain Child characteristics, Caretaker characteristics, Placement characteristics, Family environment, Service characteristics, and Caseworker behaviours as the detrimental factors affecting reunification of foster children back to biological families.

Goerge's (1990) survival analysis of children who entered foster care for the first time in Illinois between 1977 and 1984 suggests that there were several factors associated with a decreased probability of reunification such as the more placements a child experienced while in foster care the less likely the child was to successfully reunify with their families of origin; children placed with relatives were less likely to reunify than children placed with non-relative foster care providers (cited in Shaw 2006). Other studies by Courtney (1994), Davis et al 1997, Wells and Guo (1999) indicate that there are factors such as age group of children, frequency of re-entry in care system, ethnicity, structure of the household etc have impact on successful reunification of foster children in to the biological families (Ibid).

#### **4.2 The importance of contact between foster child and biological parent**

*'States parties shall respect the right of the child who is separated from one or both the parents to maintain personal relations and direct contact with both parents on a regular basis, except if it is contrary to the child's best interest.'* (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989)

From the above quotation, continued contact with biological parents is seen as an imperative, a right that each child is entitled to. However, in the course of time ongoing debates subsist over the last decades, questioning whether it is in the child's best interest to remain in contact with a parent who previously failed to meet his/her needs or not. Despite concerns that continued contact might be detrimental to secure the child's attachment to the foster family the available evidence stemming from research, suggests that continuing contact between the biological parents and their children placed in foster care are an vital precondition for not only ensuring a well-developed sense of belonging, identity and self-esteem but as well as for the possibility of working towards the goal of being reunited with their biological family (Browne & Molony 2001; James 1998; Haight et al 2005; Sinclair et al, 2006).

Oyserman & Benbenishty (1992:541) emphasize the importance of contact when they state that, 'if children are to return home ... their emotional connection to their biological parents must be promoted. By contrast Sinclair et al (2006) argue that previous qualitative studies sometimes suggests that children on the other hand don't always want to remain in contact with their birth parents and that research failed to find consistent evidence that contact does indeed promotes wellbeing. These studies however find that there are indeed a link between contact and reunification and is seen as an essential element to be included in family preservation efforts if reunification is to be the ultimate goal.

A lack of appropriate information and support from social workers has been identified in previous studies as a core underlying reason for the inability of biological parents to execute their right to visit with their children as these professionals failed to prioritized parental

contact (Moyers et al, 2006). This was confirmed by a study conducted by Millham *et al.* (1986:238) when they state that:

‘We have seen, that considerably more children suffer isolation in care because of the barriers inherent in separation, the failure of social workers to appreciate the difficulties parents face in maintaining contact and an omission in social work planning to give children’s family links much significance’ (cited in James, 1998:177).

The importance of contact is undeniable as it is evident from previous studies that children in care have a need for continuous contact with their birth family (Sinclair et al. 2006; Waldfogel 2001) On the other hand, however, Cleaver (2000, p273) notes that contact was rarely connected with a particular goal: ‘for contact to occur was sufficient in itself’, but contact alone was often insufficient to promote a child’s return home’ (cited in Moyers et al, 2006). The author continues by offering the following possible reasons for continuous contact, such as the need to work towards re-unification and/or to maintain the young person’s sense of identity and their place within their family network; was it to improve relationships between young people and their parents and resolve attachment issues or to reassure young people that they had not been rejected; or was it for a combination of some or all of these reasons? (ibid). It is clear that there is a need for social workers to carefully consider and assess what the aim of contact is for each person.

In the past Swedish social agencies have been highly criticized by authorities for not maintaining relationships with the biological parents and for not offering rehabilitation services to biological parents thereby failing to bring on reunification (Andersson, 1999:176). The author however mentioned that Sweden, today realizes the importance and ‘positive value’ of continued contact between the foster child and the biological parent (Ibid). Höjer (2007:79) confirms this by stating that contact between children placed in foster care and their biological family is highly prioritized as the law mandates that contact should be encouraged and supported even though children are placed in foster care.

#### **4.3 CO-OPERATION: Working together towards reunification**

Although co-operation is seen as the new buzz word in conceptualizing professional work with children and families, there is little research evidence on how social service departments changed their ways of working especially with regards to joint decision making. To act in ‘the best interest of the child’ is however the paramount principle whereby decisions must be justified almost all over. Willumsen & Skivenes (2005:198) suggest, in order to make lawful decisions in agreement with ‘the best interest of the child’ aiming towards ‘reasonable collaboration’ and ‘service-user participation’ should be the intent when working in the field of child protection.

A particularly applicable point to the reunification of children in foster care, collaboration between the different parties concerned, e.g. the child care social worker, the foster family social worker, the biological parent, the child and the foster parent seems to be an essential component when working towards reunification. Similarly, however, Jack (1997:109) points out ‘the need to distinguish between not only the number and structure of relationships, but also their quality and availability, at different times and in varying social circumstances’. In relation to the reunification process, these interactions between the different parties involved, can result in diverse outcomes (Ibid) therefore emphasizing the importance of having a



common goal due to the realization of how different views and opinions of these stakeholders can affect the successful reintegration of the child back into the biological family.

#### **4.3.1 Biological parents (target system) & Social workers (change agents)**

*'The most important condition for success was found always to be the quality of the relationship between a child's family and the responsible professional...Taken as a whole, the findings did not suggest any need for a wholesale restructuring of the child protection process'* (Dartington 1996, cited in Jack, 1997:116).

Working together as professional (service provider) and biological parent (service user) seems not to be such an easy task. Koeske & Koeske (1989) place the blame on the professional by stating that they often fail to 'build good relationships' due to their inability dedicate adequate time to this process as a result of often very 'high caseloads' (cited in De Boer & Coady, 2007:32). To the contrary, De Boer & Coady (2007:p32) argue that due to the common goal of the 'care and protection and potential separation of children from their parents' these two parties are forced to work together.

James (1998:179) argues that partnerships with families is perhaps the most challenging principle underpinning the Children Act 1989 and is seen as essential in improving practice with children and their families. According to the author the 'partnership principle' reflects the growing concerns, that the use of essential powers and the inability to include biological parents to take part in decisions about their children negatively impacts on sound planning and decision-making procedures which at the end resulted in numerous children experiencing a 'sense of loss' and displacement. Therefore, Willumsen & Skivens (2005:198) emphasize the importance of a more inclusive approach to the biological parents in terms of decisions made in order to ensure that all needs and interests are met. They authors continue by arguing that without the valuable input of these parties it would be impossible to make sound decisions. When examining the importance of a more inclusive approach towards biological parent, Fratter *et al.* (1991) state that by including a child's birth parents into the decision-making process indicates the significance of being able to identify the child's on-going need to have contact (cited in Andersson, 1999:177).

The aim of service provision to the biological parents while their children are in foster care does not only rely on ensuring a safe and stable home environment but should also be a nurturing experience for the children (Kapp & Vela, 2004:197). Various authors (James, 1998; Kapp & Vela, 2004) advocate for an 'inclusive' approach to temporary foster care with the emphasis on biological parents taking part in the decision-making process. This notion is also supported by Petrie & Corby (2002) who emphasize the importance of 'the partnership principle' were professionals are viewing parents as partners in the goal of improving the development of the children as they also have the best interest of their children at heart (cited in Harlow & Shardlow, 2006:70).

#### **4.3.2 Cooperation between childcare social workers and foster family social workers (change agents)**

Professionals, having to work together towards one common goal (in the context of family reunification), may experience difficulty in doing so, as they represent different clients, for

example, the foster family social worker represent the foster parent whereas the child care social worker represent the needs of the child and that of the biological parent. In addition, when representing different interests may cause confusion as to whether action taken or decisions made is indeed in the 'best interest of the child' (Willumsen & Skivenes, 2005). As said before all of them would claim to be working 'in the best interest of the child'. On the contrary, Willemsun & Skivenes (2005) state that due to the multiple aspects concerning this principle of 'in the child's best interest' tend to be a challenge to both the 'professionals' and the 'lawmakers' in the field.

According to Harlow & Shardlow (2006:67) 'the relationship between professionals is important to the functioning of core groups and is influenced by the availability and continuity of staff, the very nature of child protection itself, and competing professional perspectives'. In this study conducted by Harlow & Shardlow (2006:68) they have find that professionals participating in the study described each other as being 'afraid of sharing responsibility'. In contrast to this identified fear, Frost's (2004) claims based on the outcomes of recent research, that when working together in a 'joint' effort, professionals benefited by learning from each other as well as having the opportunity to be more reasonable and sensible in their approaches. The authors conclude that 'while anxieties associated with safe-guarding children will remain, the role of social worker as social scapegoat for the abuse of children may diminish as universal services shoulder a higher level of responsibility – this distribution of responsibility may mean that social workers enjoy a greater level of practical and emotional support from other professionals' (Harlow & Shardlow, 2006:71).

### **4.3.3 Involving the child (client system) in decision-making**

Increasingly the needs of children to have an opportunity to voice their opinions in terms of decision-making that would affect him/her are being recognized in legislation (See principles of CRC) and through a growing body of research.

Hessle & Vinnerljung (1999) state that since the 'best interest of the child' is the first priority when intervening in lives of children it is of utmost importance that the child is given the opportunity to express his/her opinion about his/her situation, which should also be taken into consideration. Andersson (1999b) complement this view by stating that if possible the organization of placements should be orientated based on the child's wishes, taking into accounts the age and maturity of the child.

Various authors (Barford & Wattam 1991, McNeish & Newman 2002) acknowledge this profound paradigm shift from children being previously only seen as the 'recipients' of child welfare interventions to that of being a active partner in the decision making process (cited in Harlow & Shardlow, 2006). It seems clear that, the involvement of children could lead to intervention being more aimed at meeting their individual 'needs' and 'preferences' (Ibid).

## **4.4 SUPPORT SERVICES:**

The provision of support to biological parents is viewed as a legally mandated responsibility of Child welfare agencies as these services are aimed at the preservation of families or to work towards reunification (Barth et al 2005). There is a growing concern, however about

whether by offering family support could be contradictory to delivering child protection services.

A previous study suggested that family support services is viewed as the provision of much needed 'information and referral, counselling and mediation, parent skills training and other educational skills development, advocacy, home visiting and other in-home support' (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2001 cited in Tilbury, 2005:150). The positive value of the provision of the availability of support services is emphasize by Jack (1997) as he argued that this service can 'enhance family functioning and parental competence by improving parents access to information and counselling, providing reinforcement of appropriate parenting and integrating family members into wider community networks (Jack, 1997).

Tilbury (2005:156) states that if child welfare services are intended to 'rescue children from bad parents' then the performance indicators selected to monitor success are likely to be different to those selected if the primary goal is to 'help disadvantaged parents care for their children'. Masson et al (1997 cited in James, 1998) emphasize the danger of marginalizing work with children being looked after and their families by highlighting the importance of contact between children and their families; the need to promote the identity of children separated from their families as well as the importance of parental involvement in decision-making about their children.

According to Jack (1997:114) 'the effect of the child protection discourse is to place social workers and the families they are supposed to be helping into clearly demarcated, separate camps, in which fear and suspicion continually undermine individual attempts to develop relationships based on the principles of partnership, common understanding and mutual trust and respect'. From this view point it is clear that the best solution instead would be to offer a two-fold focus on both 'protection' and 'prevention' which at the end moves policy and practice towards a more integrated approach taking into account the interaction that exist in between personal, family and social factors which might contribute towards child abuse and neglect (Tilbury, 2005).

Jordan (in press, cited in Jack,1997) stated that child protection social workers themselves contributed towards them earning the title of being viewed as strict, formal and 'power-laden' in the current discourse and therefore acting against approaches of partnerships when providing family support services as they are hesitant in working towards a more informal, collective and negotiating manner.

However, Jack (1997:114) argues that 'the nature of the child protection discourse and its dominant position in social work with children and families means that the family support provisions of the Act are continually squeezed out by the attitudes of professional staff, the procedural requirements of child protection systems and the resources which they consume'. The author however concludes that even though there are different view points in the literature, the most important and identified dimensions appear to be emotional support, social integration and practical support as it is evident that social support directly influences the quality of family life and outcomes for children (Ibid).

## **CHAPTER 5:**

### **METHODOLOGY**

In this chapter we present the methods used to conduct the study. We provide a brief overview of the chosen research method; different phases in the procedure are highlighted as well as how data were collected. The chapter ends with a short paragraph about the possible limitations of the study.

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#### **5.1 Qualitative Research**

The method of qualitative research was chosen for this study as the main aim of the research is to draw from empirical data obtained in relation to social workers perspectives based on what type of services are rendered to biological parent whose children are placed in foster care in order to work towards successful reunification. According to Kvale (1996) the qualitative research method is sensitive in capturing the experiences and projects the lived meanings. As Hammersley (1992) argues, the preference of qualitative research is vital in recording 'the world from the point view of the people studied' (cited from Silverman, 2000:8). As the subtitle of our study suggests, we wanted to look at the 'perspectives' and 'experiences' of the social workers working in the field of child care in foster family and biological families about the types of services they provide to biological parents so that the foster child can be reunified. The quantitative research method would not have been useful in drawing out the perspectives of social workers. Therefore, the selection of qualitative research is preferential in projecting exactly how these social workers view their work towards reunification as well as promoting contact with the biological parent and safeguarding the best interest of the child.

However the validity of the qualitative research is questioned in terms of its objectivity because the lived meanings and experience of the subjects interviewed may give a biased perspective. The perspective and opinions of the social workers can be biased and full of personal judgments since their views are a projection of how they view reunification services. However, as Silverman suggests, some complex areas of social realities are otherwise impossible to find with only the use of statistical projection (Silverman, 2000:8). Our qualitative interviews conducted among the social workers projects such realities perceived and experienced by social workers themselves in their world of protecting the best interest of the child and preserving the rights of children to be reunited with their biological families.

Kvale (1996:14) states that "the qualitative research interview is a construction site for knowledge". Therefore qualitative interviewing was chosen, as the aim of the study is to gain in-depth knowledge about the implementation and overall success rate of family reunification service delivery in Sweden based on the perspectives of professional social workers. Using this approach will provide the opportunity to have face-to-face interviews with the respondents selected, about their perceived perceptions and experiences with regards to reunification services.

### **5.1.1 Semi -structured Interviews**

We designed three individual semi-structured interview guides each for the foster family social worker, childcare social worker and biological parents. The individual semi-structured interview guides were chosen to allow the respondents to freely give their opinion about the current reunification services without forcing them to answer, which would otherwise be the case in a structured interview or questionnaires. The details of the interview guide are explained under the heading 2.3.2, The Designing of Interview Guide.

In-depth interviews give privilege for researchers to record information that might be missed if respondents are restricted to “forced-choice” answers (Banyard and Miller, 1998). Choice of semi-structured interviews guided the respondents to give their answers from their own point of view. As Marshal and Rossman (1995) opine that qualitative interview methods are warranted when one explores “why” something happened, the unexpected outcomes of policy programs, and potential solutions to problems. This kind of method helps the researchers to evaluate the perspectives, which may change or develop according to the respondents’ place of work or conditions (Woodhouse and Livingood, 1991).

The choice of semi-structured interviews as a method of qualitative research has its limitations and benefits. As May point out, leading questions are the grave issues in the interview research, which may lead the interviewee on the track of how the researcher view the subject itself (May 2002:157). However the researchers could minimize the risk by using clearly designed semi-structured interview guides with carefully selected words by letting the respondents float on their own world of perspectives and opinions under various themes such as their views on reunification, importance of contact, factors in the biological family environment which might affect reunification, cooperation between different parties concerned and the weaknesses and strengths of current reunification programs in their work places. In this way, the researchers have clearly defined the themes in the interview guide and asked the questions objectively to gain the fair views of the respondents.

We found that the semi-structured interview in qualitative research is a very useful method for our study as quantitative methods would have been difficult to use. Furthermore, the methods for example, a questionnaire would limit us within statistical values and forced choices of answers by the social workers. The use of the semi structured interview method helped the researchers to fully explore the perspectives of the social workers to obtain in depth information desired for our study.

### **5.2 Participants in the study and Sample**

The participants of this study are the social workers employed in four social service agencies in the Gothenburg region. Therefore from seven foster care units within Gothenburg four of these units participated in the study. We invited many social workers through contacts provided by our first two ‘contact’ social workers via email and telephone to participate in the study but only 8 social workers responded who were referred by our first two social workers. They were divided into two categories viz. foster family social workers rendering services to the foster family; and childcare social workers rendering services to the child and the biological family. We interviewed four childcare social workers and four foster family social workers that are currently working in the different social service agencies in the Gothenburg

region. The sample social workers were chosen based on the contacts provided by our research supervisor as well as our field supervisor and social workers. So the participants of the study were chosen based on the snowball method. As May (2000) suggests, snowball sampling may be the only way of accessing information when the sample population is broadly scattered or elusive. He further state that ‘initial contact may be made with the member of the population who will lead the researcher to other members of the same population.’ Thus in the same manner, two social workers were contacted in the beginning and they further referred us to other interested social workers to participate. This was necessary for the researchers like us who had limited time and resources to look for a broad sampling group. The social workers who participated in the study involve those who have worked more than 20 years and those who have worked less than 3 years both in foster care and child care.

To give our study an interesting dimension and to project the view of biological parents, we invited two biological parents: one who got their children back after foster care and another with children still in the foster care. Unfortunately, only one biological parent whose children were placed back (post reunification period) into her care was able to participate in the study. The interview with the biological parent has been presented as an illustration. The intension was not to draw any conclusions from their views, as they would not be a representative sample. We believe that the view of the biological parent has given the report another facet by enriching the quality of the report itself.

A possible reason for the limited responses when inviting participants could be the result of the biological parents and social workers inability to speak English and them having insufficient time due to work related responsibilities. The language barrier was however the main cause for the low response rate thereby hindering us to reach as many social workers and biological parents as possible.

### **5.3 Procedures**

For the systematic study in the research process, we followed the following procedures, which are listed and explained in chronological orders.

#### **5.3.1 The literature review**

The first and most important step in order to pursue the research is to conduct various electronic and library searches (literature review) to ensure that as much information as possible about the research topic is obtained. We carried out the literature review in order to avoid the risk of doing research on the issues, which were researched by the previous researchers, as well as to broaden our knowledge base in order to help to assist us in asking appropriate questions during our interviews. We focused our literature review on earlier studies conducted on the topic of reunification, importance of contact between the child and parent while the child is in foster care, cooperation between the parties involved in reunification of foster children to biological parent, support services offered to biological parent in pre and post reunification period and barriers to reunifications etc.

#### **5.3.2 The design of the interview guide**

To methodologically contribute to the aim of our study, we have prepared three individual semi-structured interview guides for the childcare social workers; foster family social workers and the biological parents. The interview guides provided us with guidelines on how to ask questions and what are the themes to cover for the purpose of our study. Major themes listed in the three interview guides are similar for example both the social workers were asked

questions based on general themes such as importance of contact, factors in the biological parents environment which may affect reunification, cooperation between the parties involved in reunification, strengths and weakness of current reunification services and challenges faced in the reunification process. However, themes in the interview guide for childcare social workers included types of services rendered to biological family in pre and post reunification period, criteria for reunification to take place. The interview guide for biological parents covered themes such as family support offered after removal as well as support received after reunification, importance of contact, cooperation and suggestions. Each interview guide was three pages long and was designed for the duration of one-hour interview period (*See appendix B 1-3*).

### **5.3.3 Data Collection**

As mentioned before, nine interviews in total were conducted which consisted of four childcare and four foster family social workers employed in four major social service agencies in Gothenburg. An additional interview was conducted with a biological parent who has been successfully reunified with her children.

Initially an invitation letter explaining the purpose of the study as well as the research questions developed for the study were sent to the various social workers requesting their willingness to participate in our study. Our field practice supervisors also contacted friends and colleagues to participate in the study. After the social workers responded with possible dates and times indicating their availability, individual interviews with each social worker were conducted using tape recorders in their preferential places or in their offices.

After the researchers and respondents were introduced, semi- structured interview guides were used to ask various relevant questions on each theme as outlined in the interview guides. Two researchers conducted the interviews. The researchers asked questions and crossed checked whether the questions asked under different themes were covered well. When one theme was covered, another researcher moved on asking questions on the next relevant theme. At the end of the interview, all the respondents were asked to confirm whether there was anything more on the topic that they wanted to add.

After all the interviews were conducted, all the interviews were transcribed using word processor under defined themes so that it would become easy for the respondents to cross check their responses under clearly defined themes. The data was transcribed without using the respondent's identity by assigning each individual respondent with an alphabet from A – H. This was done in order to not to disclose the identity of the respondents and to ensure the confidentiality of data obtained from respondents. After the transcription was finished, all the transcribed interviews were sent back to the respondents for them to check whether the researchers recorded the actual views of the respondents. The transcribed interviews were ready for analysis after the respondents corrected and developed their answers and sent it back to the researchers to use in the study.

### **5.3.4 Data Analysis**

Kvale (1996:192) highlights five methods of analyzing data obtained from qualitative interviews namely meaning categorization, meaning condensation, narrative structuring, meaning interpretation and ad-hoc method for generating meaning. An Analysis entails determining whether or not the information gained is relevant to the research topic (*ibid*). The researchers thus first started off by transcribing the interviews and after the respondents

corrected the transcribed interviews, the researchers read them thoroughly to each other in order to get an in-depth and correct understanding of the respondent's experiences and perspectives.

Kvale (1996:237) stresses that the trustworthiness of statements given by respondents will affect the overall validity and quality of the research. He further stated that therefore it is of utmost importance that interviewers carefully check the type of questioning and clarify what is said, as this will have an impact on the analysis and the validity and soundness of interpretations.

The researchers summarized interview texts by applying the method called meaning condensation whereby lengthy statements were shortened by rephrasing it, using fewer words (Kvale, 1996:190). When analyzing, the researcher examined how respondents defined themes presented to them during interviews. The transcribed data were then put into different thematic categories in order to derive meaning from information obtained during the interviews. Further more, the meaning categorization of the statements was done based on our two broad theoretical frameworks – attachment theory and system and ecological perspective. As the study was inductive, we categorized the statements based on the theories and research questions and analysed using the postulation of the theories.

Finally, categorized meanings of respondent's statements were re-narrated if necessary while analyzing the data and some parts of the statements are quoted and put as they are in the report. The direct quotations are presented as they spoke and are introduced by the alphabets assigned to them while collecting data. Thus, the researchers used the narrative structuring method in analyzing the interview data gathered from the social workers in order to bring different pieces of information together in a researcher's language (Kvale, 1996:192). The aim of narrative restructuring was to provide better understanding for the readers by drawing out the experiences and perspectives of the respondents.

#### **5.4 Ethical considerations**

Ethical concerns with regards to social research is seen as one of the most important buzz words in terms of what is ethical in the interest of not only for the researcher or the subject being studied but also for the respondents taking part in the study. The principals of informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity are of primary consideration when conducting this research study. Kvale (1996:110) emphasizes the importance of applying ethics throughout the research process.

To maintain the informed consent, researchers made the respondents fully aware of the purpose of the study, where the researcher explained the aim of the research before the questions were asked. All the respondents have been presented with a copy of informed consent.

For the confidentiality of the respondents, all the names of the respondents have been waived and introduced in the report as child care social worker and foster family social worker. To avoid the risk of breaking the confidentiality of the respondents, a letter of the alphabet were assigned to each respondent.

As Kvale (1996) mentioned, the scientific gains from conducting research should also take into account the possible improvement of the human situation being investigated. Therefore the researchers cannot guarantee whether this research will actually help in changing the



perspectives of social workers. However, researchers believe that by participating in the research the professional social workers in the foster care system will benefit from the study as the aim is to reflect on their perspectives about the existing reunification services being rendered. In order to ensure that the analysis of the data collected is in line with the ethical guidelines stipulated in Kvale (1996:111) the transcribed interviews were made available to the respondents to read, giving them an opportunity to approve and verify information to be used in the analysis and reporting of the data. The participation of the professionals in the interview was voluntary which the researchers informed obtained the consent to use the data from them before we used. Feedback from them about the transcribed interviews proves our ethical conduct in this regard.

### **5.5 Validity, Reliability and Generalizability**

The vital question however, is to whether ‘the research is valid’ seeks the answers of how researchers actually carried out the interview and whether the data were gathered in a correct manner. Kvale (1996:238) postulated that validity is the comprehensive context where the research project must satisfy by answering whether a method researches what it is intended to find out. Kvale notes that “the issue of validity further refers to the truth and correctness of a statement”. The author also highlighted that validation involves ‘checking, questioning and theorizing the knowledge produced’. As this study is inductive, the researchers have worked emphasizing on the quality control through out the process of the production of knowledge (Kvale, 1996). The analysis of the data complies with the intended aim of the study, data are analysed being mindful about the theoretical framework and theoretical framework and study outcomes are in line with the research questions prepared.

Gilbert (2001) stated that reliability of the findings is based on whether it is possible to repeat the study, whether the questions are clearly worded and whether similar results would be obtained using the same questions. The data claims to be reliable because the researchers have used similar interview guides to all the social workers in the same categories. This has produced the equal opportunities for all the participants to express their views. The data is reliable because the researchers followed a valid method in collecting and analyzing data keeping in mind the profound theoretical frameworks.

Due to the lack of representative participation of the social workers in the study, the report cannot be generalized to the whole population. Kvale (1996:232) discuss Stake’s (1994) three forms of generalizability viz. naturalistic, statistical and analytical. Our research result is based on the analysis of the views of respondents, which are supported and analyzed using literature and theoretical evidence and making the arguments explicit. We leave the readers to judge whether the result is soundly generalizable (Kvale, 1996:232). However, as this, study is only focussed on the perspectives of social workers working in the foster care field and carried out in a short time span, the importance of meaningful perspectives of the social workers and truthful data is vital.

### **5.6 Limitations of the study**

The research is carried out as the fulfilment of 10 credit points of International Masters. The time frame and the number of participants in the study are insufficient. If the study is carried out in a large representative sample, the results may be new and different however the perspectives remain the same. Due to the nature of the qualitative study, a large number of respondents could not be met within a short span of time. So the report does not claim to be ultimate research and suggests further research in the area of reunification services in Sweden.

## CHAPTER 6

### RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

In this chapter we present the results and analysis of the empirical data obtained while interviewing four child care social workers and four foster family social workers working in the field of foster care. The results and analysis are combined together to ease the understanding of the readers of how the data obtained was interpreted by the researchers. The findings are presented under different themes according the aim of the study and are analyzed using both the theoretical framework and logics based on earlier researches. The main focus has been given to the perspectives of professionals with regards to the reunification services they offered to biological parents. As an illustration, the perspective of one biological mother, whose children has been reunified after a foster placement of 1 ½ years, are presented.

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#### 6.1 Results and Analysis

As the main aim of this paper is to draw conclusion from empirical data obtained in relation to social workers' perspectives based on the type of services being rendered to biological parents whose children are placed in foster care in order to work towards successful reunification, the data has been categorized under various themes according to the research questions. This is done in order to reflect on their role in the reunification process and the implications for children and families in these increasingly dominant foster care settings. Reference to published literature facilitated the analysis of the data and allows insights to be considered in terms of a more global context. What follows is not a balanced account of practice within one authority, but a spotlight on the kind of challenges experienced in relation to services delivered to biological parents in order to promote reunification of their children placed in foster care in Sweden. The data has been analyzed under the following eight themes:

- Perspectives of social workers in terms of reunification.
- Current legislation on reunification and the implementation thereof.
- The importance of contact between the biological family and the foster child (Attachment theory).
- Factors in the family system affecting pre and post reunification period (System Theory).
- Strengths and weaknesses of current reunification services in terms of family needs, service delivery and its outcomes (Systems theory).
- Co-operation between all parties concerned working towards reunification (Systems theory & the ecological perspective).
- Services offered to biological parents after reunification in order to prevent re-entry (systems & attachment theory).
- Criteria needed for reunification to take place (ecological perspective).

Each issue has been explored in turn before we draw provisional conclusions (chapter 6 Discussion and Conclusions) for the practice of social work in terms of the reunification of foster children into biological family.

### 6.1.1 Perspectives of social workers in terms of reunification

#### *Reunification service delivery as an action system*

All participants, both child care and foster family social workers agreed that the reunification of children placed in foster care would be the ideal outcome but they all felt that this is something that very rarely happened in practice.

Foster family social worker (C): 'The aim of foster care is to get the child back to the original family and sometimes it happens but it's very seldom and we are always talking when we are getting new foster families, we are always talking about this.... This is not your child .... The aim of foster care is that the child will go back into his family. When we are talking... there are two different lines.... When we are talking about elder children...teenagers then of course they are more back in their original families but when we talk about smaller children... younger children I think it's very seldom!'

Child care social worker (D): 'It's very important ... It's the main goal ... the reunification. We must have the goal so that we can work to the direction and follow the direction if it's possible. But in most cases it is impossible.

Although acknowledging that reunification is something that the law required them to look into, several statements from respondents had a negative and most often ambivalent view towards the concept of 'reunification'. All social workers had a perception that reunification policy is something very idealistic although existing policies and frameworks are advocating that reunification should be the main goal. A possible reason for this could be that they had seen so many negative experiences of re-entry which might have fuelled their negative thinking. This in turn might have influenced the way services are being rendered to the biological family. The argument is that the negative attitude would result in a social worker's irresponsiveness to offer the necessary motivation for biological parents which is needed to make the necessary improvement for the child be able to return home. One important question arising from this perception is that whether a negative attitude could advocate for a positive result of reunification?

Other participants did, however, note that an emphasis on reunification is important even though it might seem difficult to achieve. Another concern was that parents can be alienated by the need to offer the child a safe and secure place in the foster home.

Foster family social worker (A): 'But I think its also important, maybe its not possible for a child to go back to live with the biological parents but still the role of the biological parents can still be very, very important and if they can confirm that, ok, I can see that you are better off with this family, they love you and I love you and I want the best for you and I think that you are maybe better off to live with them but still my relation with you is very important. It's not a physical reintegration but it's still an emotional reintegration which is also very important.'

By offering the alternative of still having the parent involved even though reunification is not possible pose both positive and negative implication. On a more positive note, although there seem to be a feeling of hopelessness towards reunification, it does not mean the total exclusion of biological parents from the child's life but offers a more 'joint parenting' approach in the out-of-home care placement of children. On the other hand it could also be seen as an indicator that professionals have changed their objective away from the possibility of reunification which at the end pose the question to whether service delivery will be rendered in such away that if change does occur, we can move towards the goal set out in the law – 'of children to be reunited with the families of origin as soon as possible! This would

then be contradictory to the law which mandates that services should be directed towards reunification.

### **6.1.2 Current legislation on reunification and the implementation thereof.**

#### ***Systems and the implementation of reunification service delivery as an ‘action system’:***

One of the key systems which are involved in the reunification service delivery process is the Legal system. Participants emphasized the importance of the law as a formal system which is mandatory within the ‘reunification’ process. The study made it clear that as a country Sweden upholds specific laws in the favour of the reunification of foster children as the ultimate goal of foster care program. Two different laws, SOL and LVU as discussed in chapter 3 were identified and all participants indicated that these were the laws that regulated their daily work in the reunification process. In some interviews, some workers reported that they found the available legislation both limiting and to some extent threatening: They said,

Child care social worker (H): ‘I’m not very fond of LVU! Because with SOL you can always explain that if you do that and that you do LVU’

Foster family social worker (C): ‘There is always the weakness that the law is the law and they are lawyers and we are social workers and there is a gap in how we view the child. The parent’s right in the law is strong- Too much focus on parents rights than that of the child. And it is sometimes difficult to talk about the child’s right and often SOL – you have to have the yes from the parents whereas with LVU it is compulsory.’

Social workers awareness of these contradictions in this study was substantiated especially as all participants commented that the law mandated that the child’s best interest should be seen as a guideline while making decisions that affect them, and thereby the concern that children might not be adequately represented. Braye & Preston-Shoot (1997) therefore argue that the law can be seen as containing conflicting imperatives: ‘needs versus rights, welfare versus justice and autonomy versus intervention’ (cited in Adams et al 2002:63). This dilemma of meeting both the needs of children and those of the biological parents are confirmed by Braye & Preston-Shoot, (2002 cited in Adams et al 2002:69) when they argued that ‘some procedures in child protection have to balance welfare justice, where the requirement to promote the child’s welfare conflicts with the parent’s right to the justice of a fair investigative process and trial’.

There were many frustrations as participants in the study sometimes felt that the child’s interests would be lost as parents rights would tend to overshadow those of the child when pushing towards reunification. Braye & Preston-Shoot, (2002) identify with this dilemma when stating that ‘practitioners and managers must negotiate the resulting dilemmas at the interface of practice and law, where professional values and knowledge are sometimes in uneasy juxtaposition with legislative requirements or intentions’ (cited in Adams et al 2002:63). Results from the study showed that the related set of laws do not necessarily offer a clear directive and are not always accommodating social work values.

Due to prevailing organizational and political interests reflected in practice, professionals tend to overlook ‘moral concerns’ thereby undermining their ‘moral responsibility’ as a result of the demand to do the accepted thing and perform obediently (Preston-Shoot, 2000a cited in Adams et al 2002:68). From this notion it is clear that social workers faced adverse difficulties trying to meet the needs of the child, the parent and all other stakeholders concerned within the boundaries of the law. From this discussion we could also question whether, the law is indeed complementing the needs not only that of the child but also that of

the parent as well as the service provider and question whether the law is still a useful tool for social workers to use when they have to make decisions that could affect the lives of those involved in a profound manner.

**6.1.3 The importance of contact between the biological family and the foster child.  
(Attachment theory)**

The profound notion of the importance of contact is about whether systematic and frequent contact either physical or emotional, will help making reunification to the biological parents and the child easier and sustainable. All the social workers have identified the importance of contact between the biological parents and the child. According to the views of both the child care social workers and foster family social workers, the degree of contact between the parents and the child develop the sense of attachment between the two and hence helps making reunification easier.

The table below highlights the basic ideas expressed by the respondents on the issues related to importance of contact and where in the network the dilemma and confusion arises, which results in either negative or positive affect on reunification. For example, according to the social workers, there is intrigue while deciding on promoting contact when the foster family does not understand why the child has to see the parents as the child is very upset or emotionally unstable after they meet their parents. On the other hand, there is sometime reverse sides of contact when the child see addictive parents and compares between their ‘bad’ parent and their ‘generous’ foster parent. These two facets of information from the foster parents and the biological parents leave the social workers in dilemma of whether or not to decide to let the child meet the parents.

**Table 1: Issues related to Contact with biological parents and the child**

Categories related to the implication of Contact	Outcome of the contact issues
Impact on the child	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sense of belonging and Identity</li> <li>- Confirmation</li> <li>- Feeling of responsibility</li> <li>- Healthy attachment feeling</li> <li>- Insecure and secure base</li> <li>- Attachment behaviors</li> </ul>
Difficulties caused by foster parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Attachment to the child</li> <li>- ‘Not in the best interest of the child’</li> <li>- Projection of bad sides of biological Parents to the child.</li> <li>- ‘Does not see the use of it’ continuous Contact with biological parents.</li> </ul>
Difficulties caused by biological parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Anger</li> <li>- Substance abuse</li> <li>- Act of withdrawal</li> <li>- Competition with the foster family</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Risk of frequent contact with Problematic parents.</li> </ul>

Dilemma of the Social Workers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Frequency of contact.</li> <li>- Nature and ways of contact.</li> <li>- Whether it is in the best interest of the Child.</li> <li>- Care of children VS treatment of Biological parents.</li> </ul>
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Even with recognition of the potential benefits of continued contact of an ‘all in favour of contact approach’, child care and foster family social workers indicated that it is a challenging and difficult process. As listed above all participants thought of ‘in the best interest of the child’ as their guiding principle when deciding upon the importance of contact. However, as the study showed, whether or not the biological parents are harmful for the child, cutting off all the contact and erasing the history and background of the child creates more anxiety for the growing child. Both childcare social workers and foster family social workers highlighted the importance of contact.

Foster family social worker (C): ‘I think the contact with the biological family is a ground for the child to be and feel OK in foster care. You can’t just cut it off because, then the identity won’t be OK for the child, and there will always be question about what happened to my family, parents and so. And the question also too long time between the meetings ...What about my mother? Is she OK? Is she drinking? Is she feeling well? So, there will be an anxiety around the child and I think it’s much better for the child to see a bad parent ... bad in that sense, a parent that’s ill than not seeing at all.’

Child care social worker (F): ‘I think contact with the biological parents is important for the child. The first thing is how much or how often. Or is it possible? Sometimes may be its not possible or may be its not good for the child to visit parents but they need to have the picture of their parents. They need to know how they are and where they are and to have information. That’s important.’

As social workers stated above, although they all acknowledge the importance of contact, the problem lies on how to improve the contact so that it would be beneficial to both the child and the parents. Sometime the child does not want contact with the biological parents which are detrimental in reunification. The adverse situation of parents wanting to see the child and the child avoiding the contact sometime has burnt out the energy of the social workers.

Foster Family Social worker (C): Then there is of course, you have to respect the child’s opinion. I have girl of twelve and she’s begging me... ‘*Please don’t let me see my mother... I don’t want to see her... please let me be*’. And she has been in family care. First she was two ½ years old when she came into family care and then she went back for nearly two years to her mother and then it didn’t work out so she came back. And her mother is trying to say to her... ‘*It’s ok I want you to stay in the family, I want to take you back home again, please let me see you*’. And I am trying to convince her... saying that ... *this is ok, you won’t get back to your mother but you have to see her, it is good for you*. But now I think I have reached the limit, I can’t press her anymore.

During this study social workers suggested more structured visits as a way out to improve current contact sessions. The success of structured visits by biological parents to their child in foster care depends on how well the social workers manage to prepare the parents in terms of ‘grief and suffering of the biological parents, ‘separation anxiety of the child’ and attitudes of the foster parents. When working towards family preservation, structured visits is vital in the endeavour to reunite families thereby suggesting regulated visits, (Haight et al. 2005:460). However, based on the experience of the social workers, the structured visits are affected by psychological and interpersonal complexities of problems of the participants of the visit (ibid).

From the information obtained in this study, it is clear that contact as an intervention method, is a way out for improving social relationships. Children who are placed in foster care are often the victim of disorganized and defective 'attachment relationship' which prevents them in forming a secure and good social relationship (Howe, 1995:60). The problem in the reunification of the child with the biological parents also has its root to the child's experience on the deprivation of secure relationship with parents when the child was in the biological family. The child is taught not to trust. This continues even more when the child is placed in more than one foster family during his/her stay in the public care system there by the child never learns to attach and build a secure base. On the other hand neither physical care nor duration of the time the caregiver spends with the child decides the attachment (Ainsworth 1973, cited in Howe 1995:64) but the quality of interaction and relationship between the child and parent (ibid). Thus, the quality of interaction as Howe (1995) postulated improves the level or consistency and warmth between the child and the parent. Therefore the focus should be on promoting the quality of interaction between the child and the parent to develop the secure base. Often this can be easier in working with the biological family system as the children are biologically programmed to have emotional bonding with the biological parents. Given the condition that parents have improved their social condition, the study showed that it is always easier to reunite the children with their biological parents when they have strong bonds with each other.

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#### **6.1.4 Factors in the family system affecting pre and post reunification period. (System Theory)**

All the respondents opined that there are different sets of factors which work together having direct and indirect affect in the possibility of reunification. Child Care social workers were more aware of the factors affecting the possibility of reunification of the foster child to the biological parent. Foster family social workers were more aware about the factors which make reunification easier when the child is still in the foster care system.

All the social workers agreed to the fact that various factors within the system of the biological family (service agency, foster family, schools and social networks, the readiness of the child and around the child) work together creating an interconnecting system. The failure of one factor in a system may hamper the implementation of system itself. Payne (1996) defines 'non-summativity' as the idea that 'the whole is more than the sum of its parts'. This means that looking at systems; one has to consider the broader environment instead of only its individual parts.

The parents' capacity to fulfil the child's need is the major factor affecting reunification. The notion of 'good enough parent' is still at dilemma as there is no standard definition of what is good enough parents. However many social workers opined that internal motivational factors and parents readiness to take the child back along with parenting skills were determining factors in reuniting the child back to them.

Foster family social worker (A): "Well if there is a rehabilitation program, for example for drug abuse. If they can be involved in that but also the personal contact with the social worker, to be able to make them understand their situation and if they can develop their ability as parents, increase the ability as a parent, to be more aware of what the children need."

Foster Family Social Worker (G): “of course it is important that they have a liveable life but I don’t know any other, I mean of course there is lot of stuff but it is difficult to talk in general terms because what is a liveable life and I mean it’s more important that they can take care of their child.”

The vital factor is the realization of the biological parents about what was wrong when the child was placed in the care system and what should be improved to get the child back. The Social workers told that sufficient support to the parent to become good enough parents plays a vital role in making them realize how important it is to get the child back. Within the context of the systems theory the biological parent is seen (as the target system) as part of its informal network. This gives an indication that the person is part of a broader system but how the network is utilized is dependant on the individual. Almost all social workers agreed that the biological parent is part of a wider environment and this informal network (close relatives, friends) is directly influenced and involved.

In the study some social workers said that the visible health problems such as drug abuse and alcohol abuse are easy to treat but it becomes extremely difficult if the parent do not possess the necessary motivation to improve their situation.

Child social Worker (E): “But most of all I think is Motivation of the parents to work to get the child back. Because, nearly all parents they don’t want the children to be placed in the foster care. ...// Then when we place them in foster care, they regret the decision. But lot of parents loose the motivation to change the situation to get the children back after a while. The mother I met that actually have the motivation still and want to work with their problems something like that to get the child back. Then I think that is the biggest factor.”

The work situation and daily discipline of biological parents and their capacity to fulfil in the needs of the children are the factors that help reunification to be easier. But if the parents are not good with their parenting skills and do not get up or go to work, that hinders the reunification process. Other than the Factors in the client system, there are other factors such as social networks of the biological family which play important part in making reunification easier and faster. According to the social workers, the social network around the parent is very important such as grand parents, relatives and siblings. The network meetings organized by the social service agencies try to find various solutions on how such social network of the biological parent can work to make reunification easier.

Foster family social worker (A): “Sometimes we have what we call network meetings where we try to bring in all the resources around the parents and the children. Different people, grand parents or relatives they can say I can contribute with this and I can do this so the child can come home”

Most participants see support networks not just from formal systems (social workers) but as well as informal systems, such as close relatives and friends as contributing to the process of reunification. They noted that if the relationships with informal networks are good it is positive for the target system and the reunification process can continue with greater support. However it seems of utmost importance that the social workers give clear instructions and guidance to the biological parents as to what to do, what not to do should they want to work towards the goal of being reunited with their children.

Child Care social Worker (E): “But it also might have so big problem in school. It might be that the child might be damaged from his upbringing and he can not be in the normal class room situation. So its more of a support... and here in Sweden its up to the school and community area where the child leaves to decide if they can get the support in the class room or not. And in some areas they are not very willing to give the child the right support. So I think these could be the factors which could be more difficult for the families to succeed”



Many social workers said that financial factors is not always the determining factors as most of the biological parents can be financially “well off” but their social behaviours is problematic. However, all the social workers agreed that the communication between the foster family and biological family as well as good contact between the parent and the child plays the crucial role in reunification.

Foster family social worker (A): “I’m thinking of another factor which is contact between the foster home and the biological family when the child has gone back home. I think it can be very important to have that contact. In this case, where reunification was possible, it is very important.”

The social worker added further that it is very important to know how attached the child is to his/her parent. The Children who do not have good contact with the parent generally has the problem being attached with the foster family also. A Foster family social worker said during the study, “children that do not have that (attachment) with their biological parents they are more difficult to make new attachments to their foster home.” As Bowlby postulate, long deprivation of young child from maternal care may have a grave and far reaching effects on his character. If the child is nurtured in a quality attachment, it becomes easy for the child to psychologically be prepared to attach to other caregiver’s figure (Howe 1995). When applying to this study, this theory works similar in the case of finding the secure base in the biological parent before reunification thereby making post reunification stable and successful. Adverse to this fact, social workers in the study were also of the view that child starts bonding with the foster family and may not want to go back. Further more, social contact of the child and parent to the foster family and to other social networks after the child is reunited is important to stabilize the reunification. As one Social Worker said “You look at social relationship at general, that you don’t just cut relationships.” The Social Worker further added that the child needs to have good contact with the foster family when the child goes back to the parent which facilitates the child to rely on the foster family if the problems arise in the biological family. As one foster family social worker said:

Foster family social worker (A): “You see that is maybe not as important as the importance of the child to maintain the contact with the biological family while in foster care but is also that the child can maintain the contact with the foster family when it goes back. And again this communication (between the child and the foster family)...”

Many Social workers had the same opinion about the care and reunification plan which either lengthens or shortens the reunification. However, some social workers said that sometime putting high emphasis on the reunification may not be always in the best interest of the child. As one opined:

Child care social worker (F): “But I also think that it is important that you have a plan and it does not happen to fast so that one day to another the child should move back. We have to plan to prepare the child and the parents and also if it is possible that the foster family that they have contact and that they can help. I think it is not up to one factor. I am not sure but I can imagine that sometime it happens too fast.”

This study show that various factors as indicated above have often hierarchical relationship meaning that some factors are more dominant than other factors. However, visible and invisible factors all have significant role in either to make the reunification easier or difficult and detrimental in stabilizing the reunification.

Based on the results obtained in this study it would appear that when deciding upon reunification it is also important to consider the influencing factors from within the environment that, parents (target systems) are living in. Stress and a feeling of loneliness

caused by the trauma experienced when children are removed affects the ability of the target system to stay motivated to refrain from for example continued drug addiction or to get help but from the data obtained it appear that with the necessary social support (formal or informal) it could help parents to stay focus in their goal of being reunited with their children. Payne (1997) confirms the influence of environmental factors on the outcome of reunification as it is important to keep in mind that there might be a possibility that problems experienced by biological parents can be caused not only by a factor internal to the person, but that it could be located in the interactions between biological parents (target system) and their environment. The target systems inability to provide in their needs of their children placed in foster care could also affect the attachment between the biological parent (target system) and the child (client system) as their feeling of failure might make them feel useless and in the end hesitant to make sufficient contact.

**6.1.5 Strengths and weaknesses of current reunification services in terms of family needs, service delivery and its outcomes (Systems theory)**

Reunification is an outcome of the integrated services offered to the biological families in a systemic approach. According to the postulation of the systemic approach, it is evident that if all systems don't work together in interactive way, it can lead to difficulties within the whole system. When asked about possible strengths and weaknesses about the existing service delivery of the current reunification program, social workers pointed out that placing reunification in the agenda of the work from the policy level to the practice level is the strongest part of the present reunification services. As the social workers reflected:

Child care social worker (E): '...the strong part is that we have to work towards reunification. It has to be on the agenda all the time. We have to think about it all the time... why is it possible and why is not possible. It's like you can not put in on your desk and forget about it. You have to think about it. And we have to think how to make it possible for child to meet their parents and how often and how can we do it in a safe way. I think these are the strengths'

From the above results, the following strengths and weaknesses were derived into a table to highlight the main thoughts of the respondents.

**Table 2: Identified Strengths and weaknesses**

Strengths
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. appropriate policy</li> <li>2. integrated approach</li> <li>3.Preventative work</li> <li>4. Individual Plan</li> <li>5.Timely review ( every six months)</li> <li>6. Professional accountable to Politicians</li> </ol>
Weaknesses
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. unbalanced work load among social workers</li> <li>2. lack of cooperation between the foster family social workers and Child Care social workers</li> <li>3.lack of regulated monitoring after reunification</li> <li>4. idealistic policy (always not easy to implement in practice).</li> <li>4. Less support with biological family.</li> </ol>

The strengths of current services of reunification is the ultimate legislative aim of reuniting the foster child to the biological family. Whether the child is placed based on Social Services Act which allows the placement of children in foster care with parents consent and the Care of Young Persons Act which allows the placement without the consent of the parents, both requires half yearly placement review meaning that review are intended at evaluating the possibility of reunification. During this study social workers expressed their dilemma on how the case of the child should be handled in case of the severity of the parents inability to take care of the children due to the fact that permanency planning of these children can not be decided as the ultimate goal of the legislation is reunion to the biological family (Andersson, 1999). On the other hand, as all the social workers argued the aim of the policy is to reunite the child, often the practice makes it difficult. As one social worker claimed that sometime reunification happens to fast.

Some of the social workers explicitly pointed and realized the limitation of parental support after reunification which is the weakness of the current reunification program. The total focus on removing and protecting the child in safe environment some time takes lots of energy and resources. As one Foster family Social Worker said, the biological family gets less attention. The cost of foster care may seem relatively low but the expense of services which are placed for the management of such care is huge. The foster family argued:

Child care Social worker (E): 'I mean if we could have always more time so that we could look more into how we could help the parents and get them more motivated to work with the problems and get the more support. Because, today it's like this, I am a childcare social worker and we often place the child in foster care. Protect the child or say that the child gets the needs that they have. And another social worker tries to help the parents. And the parents have to be motivated themselves to change the situation.'

During this study relatively many social workers presented their time limitation to work informally with the biological parents as the weakness of the current system. Many social workers time have been taken by the reporting and writing and assessing which allows less contact with the biological parents as well as it restricted them from working informally and collectively to listen to the needs of the biological parents.

From the quotations below it is clear that not having enough time to work more efficiently with biological problems can be seen as one of the barriers hindering the reunification process.

Child care social worker (E): The problem is more when we place the child in foster care because the mother might have applied for it. ... I have cases where the mother says, I have to work and I cannot handle my children and want to place them in foster care... You can see that there are loads of other problems and that's not the real reason but you accept those reasons, you try to talk to them about other problems but she is not interested in talking. So, she places them voluntarily in foster care and you see that the children develop, they learn the language, and they develop great in the foster family. But you don't really have it on the table.

Foster family social worker (G): 'And we asked the question to ourselves, what would have happened if we would put all that money into the biological home. Because, we don't do that! I mean in one way, I think social workers that work here; they are the one who work with the biological families. They have to act according to the law. They have to try to work with the children in the biological families as much as possible. Because like I said in the beginning, this is the last solution to take the children from the biological families. So I don't know maybe if we should work with them as much or if we should continue with our package of social work or may be it would work other wise, I don't know.'

Childcare and foster family social workers accounts displayed the difficulties they experienced in finding enough ‘time’ to work more efficiently with biological parents in order to help them to correct problems present prior to the removal of their children. One argue that if these service providers are not in the position to offer a much needed service to biological parents that then it is contradictory again to the aim of foster care. A possible reason for this failure to allocate sufficient time could be due to several reasons. A first could be that they are so driven by this force/desire to protect and safeguard the children once removed from the foster home to much time is spend in ensuring that the child’s needs are continuously met in the foster home that little attention are given to the child’s need to be reunited with the biological parents. On the other hand we could argue that due to overloaded caseloads social workers are not in a position to offer more intensive services as they struggle to balance paying equal attention to all cases they are responsible for.

Results from this study show that with cases where parents decided to place their children voluntarily in foster care it creates difficulties for the worker to try to work with them to solve problems that existed as their give different reasons for requesting a foster placement as they are not willing to acknowledge other problems that made it difficult for them to adequately caring for their children. As postulated in the system theory, it is important to take into consideration that when working towards reunification the various parties concerned have to co-operation and are directly and indirectly in contact with each other and that based on the strengths or weaknesses of these contacts could affect the outcome of reunification. By implementing the reunification service delivery process, these systems are explored based on their ability to work together in one direction towards the same goal.

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### **6.1.6 Co-operation between all parties concerned working towards reunification: The Systems theory**

- **Co-operation between the Child care social worker and the Foster family social worker**

Statements from participants gave a clear indication that the type of co-operation that exists between the parties concerned, e.g. the relationship between the social worker and the biological parent, the relation between the two different social workers as well as the relationship between the foster mother and the biological mother, has a direct impact on the outcomes of services delivery aimed at reunifying children with their family of origin. 75% of participants were very concerned about the effect of differences of opinion between professionals on the outcome of reunification:

Foster family social worker (**B**): ‘Sometimes we have different opinions about how should contact between the biological parents and the child develop, most of the time we think that you have to secure the base with foster family and the social office think about the biological parents, their needs to meet their child. That sometimes is an issue where we have to negotiate, yes!’

Childcare social worker (**D**): ‘Often it works very well but sometimes we have totally different views, for example once the foster family did not want the child to have to meet the biological parents because they had too much problems. And I thought it was not that bad that we have to say they cannot have contact but the foster family and the social worker who works with the foster family, they had another opinion.’

What was striking is the fact that these professionals might not all be in favour of reunification as they don't share a common goal due to the fact that they represent different clients who have different needs and interests. This is problematic!

In this study this particular problem of cooperation can be explained in the light of systems theory as it provides a background to comprehend how service providers (social workers) and service users (biological parents) interact and how various change agents (for example childcare social workers and foster family social workers) is involved (Payne, 1996:141) within a social network of cooperation, which can affect the outcome of the reunification process. For example, the change agent is in the position to create conflicting situations when they fail to take into consideration the feelings of the target system after the removal of their children as well as their inability to involve these biological parents in decision-making. Therefore within the relationship between the social workers (change agent) and the biological parent (target system) there could be collaboration, where they share 'the best interest of the child', through an inclusive approach, where an agreement needs to be reached to work together as a team to resolve problems in the target system's environment to meet the goal of reunification (Payne, 1996:143).

Most respondents identified several problems in working together as a team (team consist of a child care social worker and Foster family social worker. The two different types of social workers faced dilemmas arising from each of them representing different clients and at the end would have different interests. The goal of services being rendered might not be same.

Child care social worker (H): 'You know, now we are sitting here and we are working with the child and the parents ... And also the other social workers who works with the foster family or the one's who is working with the economy or drugs, I think we should maybe form a team and work more as a team around the parents, everybody together. And not like you are doing this and I am doing that and then not working together.'

Child care social worker (H): 'Because, now we don't work like that! Now we all work with different people and have different goals. We all think differently!'

These comments seem consistent with current opinions with regards to co-operation between professionals. In a review of the theoretical and research literature, Alpert (2005:364) comments that 'conflicting goals and timelines and poor interpersonal communication may contribute to fragmented overall service delivery to parents of children in care'. The author also argued that this fragmentation of services could be directly responsible for the parents' inability to meet objectives agreed upon or to fully benefit from services offered which at the end would result in re entry into the system after reunification. These frequent comments

Others were more positive and said that:

Foster family social worker (C): 'Yes, we work closely together all the time. I give the information to the social worker all the time, continuously not even this every six month but every month and as soon as there something special happening about the child I go to her and we have meetings together, me, her, the foster family and the biological family before this every six months evaluation if it is possible. We try that as much as possible. And of course I've never been in a situation where the childcare social worker says the child has to go back to the family and I say no! As we work closely together.'

- **Co-operation between the biological parent (target system) and the social worker (change agent)**

When asked about the importance of the relationship between the biological parent as service user and the social worker as service provider, most participants acknowledged the important role this relation could have in working towards reunification but again reported not so successful experiences.

Foster family social worker (C): 'It's a pity that it's not really there, but I understand that there is too much to do because as soon as something done there is something else or a new thing waiting. So there is just not time to work on getting a good relationship. And that's a pity because, parents are left in there anxiety and frustrations and that also means that as long as a social worker can't do that work that problems might get into the foster family and that makes other problems. So, I would hope that there would be more work with the biological family when the child is taken into foster care. So that's a wish!!'

One key dilemma that child care social workers would experience is found in the difficulty in having the task of meeting both the needs of the child as well as that of the parent at the same time, as is evident in the work of Steinhauer (1991: 119) as they are expected to work 'in partnership', while at the same time 'they must simultaneously function as limit setters'. A good relationship has to be established in order for the process of reunification to be successful.

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### **6.1.7 Services offered to biological parents after reunification in order to prevent re-entry.**

Although this study found that there is a prevalence of prioritizing fostering post reunification services to the biological family for the child to sustain, there were divided opinions on the process and types of services offered. Some social workers pointed out that post reunification services are almost nonexistent or voluntary choice of the parents. Only a handful of participants in the study made suggestions regarding improving practice with biological parents as an explicit component of family reunification services.

Foster family social worker (G): 'I think we should work more with the biological parents I don't think we do that. Once the child is placed then the child has now taken care of but the child will have care in the foster family and biological families don't have any one to work with them let them go because you do your research and say no you are not good enough and you have the solution done. And sometimes if they use drugs or something, they will have social workers in another place will work for them. But, I think we should more work with it but in the same time I can see the children we get here in foster care are really far gone and it's not like oops they could not do the home works. Its not little thing. Its a big problem. Huge problems! That won't be fixed over a year otherwise we would not...'

These recommendations by the social workers were consistent with the core practice elements of Foster care (specifically family preservation) as identified in the previous literature including full disclosure, facilitation of visitation and intensive services to biological parents.

Participants in this study alluded on a number of occasions to the difficulty of rendering post-reunification services. The biological families are sometime happy to receive the suggestions and try to seek the support for parenting skills but on the other hand show general tendency that their fight is finally over and they don't have to see the social workers. Previous researches are also in line with this view that families refuse to accept suggested services or that these services were either not available, or that families did not meet the requirements to receive these services (Festinger, 1996, cited in Alpert, 2005:363).

Foster family social worker (A): 'For the first time when the child goes back the mother sometimes says I don't want to see those social workers anymore and if there's no indication that makes it possible for the welfare office to intervene, then we can't come in. So it's not automatic that a social worker can follow up a case it depends on the mother. If they say NO, it's NO!'

Child care social worker (H): 'My family did not want any support, they cut all the ties. And the foster family wanted to be the contact family but they also not hated, but they dislike the mother and father very much, so the biological parents said no!'

They also viewed this as a major reason why these families would re-enter the foster care system due to the lack of support services offered or denied after the child has been placed back. Some social workers viewed the post reunification services as voluntary, informal and optional. Social workers opined that this approach lacked planned and compulsory post reunification family support which in turn made the re-entry probable. Thus, the studies require the change agent (social worker) to enable the target system (the biological parent) to correct problems that existed prior to removal and offer them assistance (for example with drug addiction), get opportunities to stay in contact with their children as well as psycho-social support, and avoid further fall backs (relapse of alcohol/drug addiction) or when child is placed back to offer services in such a way to avoid re-entry back into the foster care system (Payne, 1996:151).

Foster family social worker (A): 'I would like them to see us as a support network and a need to continue but it is up to them to decide. There are some exceptions but in most cases they don't.'

Foster family social worker (C): 'Success, in even when the parents have the child back that we can succeed in making the foster family and biological family complementing each other to prevent re-entry. So we won't be working for either one or another. I think that would be best for the child. We are working also very much with contact families, I think we should focus more on that as many parents need that support that contact families give and even the child.'

The study showed that there is inconsistency between the services to biological families due to the nature of 'formal, individualized and power-laden' organizational structure resists the social workers to offer the support services in more 'informal, collective and negotiated approaches' (Jack, 1997:114). The role of the childcare social worker differed with the role of foster family social worker and while deciding upon the how and whether or not the support must continue to biological family before and after the reunification due to the different focus of the social workers. The study also found on the different views on family support after the reunification from region to region. Some regions have more informal approaches of supporting the biological families and the other regions have formal and phase-based family support based on the organizational structure. The social workers also pointed out the generalized parenting support to the biological family administered by separate authority. The problem with such support is that the needs of the family is diverse and is based on the problems the biological family faced prior to the removal of the child. When the child is reunited, the probable conflict and tension between the child and parents may arise which can not be addressed by the generalized parenting training. As social workers pointed out, the family sometimes show the need of individualized support to address the particular problem within the family. Various other studies also support this view that universal and generalized definition of family support leaves the children and parents out of the support as their needs are personal and there may be individualized social barriers to access to the needed services (Tillbury, 2005:150).

### **6.1.8 Criteria needed for reunification to take place**

During this study the social workers pointed out various criteria for the reunification to take place. Criteria involved mental and motivational, physical and financial; and social aptitudes of the biological parents. The ability of the parents to provide the children's need which is generally termed as being 'good enough' was often the criteria for the parents to get the child back. However the indicators of 'good enough' were different from one social worker to another.

Foster family social worker (C): 'Of course, being sober, that's a first and then a place to stay as well as being able to take care of the child. Being able to take care of yourself (parent) in that sense being able to go to work or whatever ...Or having something ordinary for the day. Very important, is to get to know the child again. And here of course it will depend on how long time the child has been in the foster care system. What I think would be the very best is to make the child and the parents to stay in some togetherness getting time with help. But often when it's caretaking with LVU, then you don't have the possibility to force the parents. So, the parents may decide that the children will come to me and then cut the connection to us and to the foster family and that makes it very difficult for the child. But that's not something that we can force. So, that's another thing that would be important to get the parent to see that there could be two parents to help the child.'

The following table explains the three aptitudes dimension of the parents to get the child back as stated by social workers.

**Table 3: Aptitudes in parental environment and its indicators**

Aptitudes	Indicators
Mental and Motivational	Being sober Understand the child Readiness to improve Constant contact with the child Ability to take care of self Emotional stability
Physical and Financial	Work /job Capacity to fulfil the physical needs of the child Financial stability Place to live Physical health such as free of drug and addiction
Social	Satisfactory informal( friends, family) and formal( school and jobs) networks

From this study it is clear that though there can be various physical and motivational factors in the environment of biological family which are detrimental for the reunification, the decision is also affected by the ability of the child to accept the parent's home as the safe and secure place to be. The parents must know the child and have constant and stable relationship with the child. Howe (1995:65) justified this as the quality relationship between the child and the parents in which the child and parent interact in a reciprocal way. Howe (1995:65) further justified that such comfort and consistent response from the child's attachment figure develops 'stimulation and excitement, security and satisfaction, recognition and validation, and dialogue and harmony' in the mind of the child. Thus as many social workers said in the study period that this quality of relationship and trust between the child and the parent is detrimental despite the poor economic situation of the parent.

Child Care Social Worker (D): "...//the relationship between the child and the biological parents must be a relationship where you can feel that the parents will take good care of the child and that the child will feel safe with the parents."



Many social workers stated that they use the tool called **Barns behov i centrum** (BBIC) means *children's need in the center*, to assess criteria for the reunification. They use this tool to assess the ability of the parents to fulfill needs of the child in the biological family's environment.

Child care social worker (F): 'We use the Triangle. Is it possible? What is the need of the child? Is it possible for the parents to address the needs? Or is it something we can provide them with or help them with or is there some areas that they need to work more with or they need help from outside. So we think in a triangle. If they can provide in the children's needs in these areas that I described, maybe they cannot provide in all the needs but maybe they can provide in some. We think in a triangle. These are the criteria.'

As stated earlier in the theoretical chapter, the system's theory proposes that all organisms are systems, composed of subsystems and are in turn part of super-systems (Payne, 1996:137). For example when looking at the criteria social workers look at to determine whether a child can be reunified or not, they have to take into account that the target system (the biological parent) is part of a family (extended family/ grandparents), and that they interact within certain groups, where these subsystems are all part of the whole of society. The study found out that the BBIC's practical implication was to assess various factors in the target system.

A criterion, which all the social workers that participated in this study pointed out, is the stable motivational aptitudes of the parents to have the child back. This motivation does not necessarily be the outcry of the parents to get the child back but instead their steady progress and changes on the situation as demanded by the social workers, which existed prior to the removal of the child. However, as many social workers also agreed that pro-active work of the social workers to help motivate the family to get back the child plays a vital role in reunification process. If parents do not feel in receipt of empowering, family-focused casework from their social worker, they may not be motivated to try through the reunification process (Alpert, 2005:365).

Though many different issues related to criteria emerged in this study all participants highlighted the importance of focusing on strengthening the parents. They said that even though the progress of strengthening the capacity of parents is relatively slow, it works positively in the right direction. According to the social workers, the effective care plan of the child as well as treatment plan to the biological family is decisive in making the reunification realistic. As the social workers said, there is a over dependent tendency of the biological families to seek what the social workers do for them instead of what themselves can do to get the child back. At the same time, social workers over emphasis the physical and financial capacity of the biological parents as the most important criteria, thereby they sometime tend to over shadow their motivational criteria. As one social worker pointed out, social workers should focus more on how they could support the biological parents to be 'good enough parents' in a realistic way. The social workers (change agents) while assessing the possibility of reunification have to focus on the target system's networks which are unavoidable in the person's daily living (Payne, 1996:150) which could in turn be prominent criteria to make the reunification successful.

## 6.2 The unheard client (an illustration)

The following is an illustration of the data obtained from the interview conducted with a biological parent whose children had been placed back into her care. Please note that no conclusions will be drawn from this data as it is not a representative sample.

*A biological mother:* "I was already in a trap you know. And who was gonna believe me against her. I am a junky and she is a social worker."

The above excerpt is from the interview conducted with a biological mother whose children had been placed back into her care. We met her through the contact of one of the social workers. She was reunited with her two children after one and half year of foster care. She had a lot to tell and all her statements were filled with emotions. The story she narrated is a story of success but the turmoil she went through in her life is a story of an unheard client which many social workers might not have listened to. When asked about her first feeling when the children were removed, she clasped both her hands together and told her story of pain and despair:

*A biological mother:* "When they took my children, at first, I sort of did not give up but I went harder on heroin just to forget... It was so (high tone) difficult...// I thought to myself, I really want to jump...you know... to commit suicide because it was too much to think that my children are crying for me and I can not be there"

She continued on her photographic memory of how her children were removed. She said it was a terrible scene and she vividly remembered when her children were being snatched by social workers.

*A biological mother:* "...//After an hour, they were going to take my children and my friend also was there. They took my children and they heard me, they would not let and I would not let go; so they with violence took the child. And I screamed and they screamed and that's what I remember."

Being a single mother and bringing up two children alone is definitely not easy for her. After the children were removed, she told that she went for rehabilitation and got her lawyer to fight the case to get her children back. She felt that she did not get enough support from her social workers and she was not motivated to rehabilitate herself to get her children back in the beginning. In terms of contact between her and her children in foster care, she could not meet her children often and they talked over the phone only. About the Cooperation, She also felt that she was not consulted regarding the care of the children as the social workers failed to listen to her. The fact that social workers told her that they did not believe that she had the ability to rehabilitate herself in order to get her children back was the most disappointing service experience for her. Now that her children are back, she indicated to the social workers that she needed financial support to send her child to her sister over the weekend as she felt she needed time alone for herself. The provision of support services after reunification appears to be vital in order to prevent re-entry back into the system. As in this case, the provision of mental and financial support is much needed in order for the children to visit

their aunt as the mother needs space for herself in order to prevent burn out and a possible relapse.

## **CHAPTER 7**

### **DISCUSSION & CONCLUDING REMARKS**

This chapter briefly presents a discussion on the general outcomes of the study and the insights gained from the research as well as concluding remarks in terms of the contribution for the profession of social work which will be followed by recommendations for further research in this field.

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#### **7.1 Discussion**

What follows is the discussion and argumentation on the various findings underpinned by our objectives of the study. The discussion of our findings are based on the views given by the social workers and are argued based on the profound literature. The discussion also highlights on the validity and reliability of the result as well as the possible methodological limitations of the study which might have prevented this study to be representative and generalizable. The study produced the following thematic findings based on the qualitative analysis of the data in chapter 6.

##### *7.1.1 Unbalanced views on reunification*

The term reunification is on the primary agenda of the Swedish social workers though it can be argued from the views given by study participants that there is a prevalence of unbalanced views with regards to the term reunification. In this study social workers were divided in their views about the outcome of the reunification process. Reunification is on the agenda of the everyday work life and the guiding principal of the social workers but in contrary to this sometime reunification is not always in the best interest of the child. The reason behind this unbalanced view could be due to the fact that professionals have different priorities on different things, safeguarding the rights of the child to be protected and on the other hand parent's responsibility to take care of the child is over emphasized.

Unbalanced views is also the result of some social workers being adult-oriented by prioritizing views of the biological parents and not taking the view of the child to be protected (Shardlow and Harlow, 2006). On the other hand, in recent years, the paramount need of the children to be protected sometime overshadows the responsibility of social workers to work towards the preservation of the family of the child and offering the help within the biological family (Ibid). Waldfogel (2001) discussed this unbalanced views as the product of tension between the professionals within the system due to the dual mandate to protect the child and preserve the family. The movement of family preservation is advocating that preserving the family and calling social workers to work more on building the strengths of the family to provide for the child (Waldfogel, 2001). Contrary to this, the Child protection activists are claiming that today's' Child Protection Services have gone too far in keeping the child with the family together at the expense of child protection (ibid). From this study it was clear that despite the fact that there are some families which are heavily broken down, where the protection of child is impossible and children need to be placed in a safe haven, there is a

strong notion whether it is in the best interest of the child or not to stay with the parent if the family situation is bound to improve through family support.

### *7.1.2 Ideal policy and problematic implementation*

The Child Protection Services always remain at the verge of problematic practice and policy. The Swedish child protection policy does not allow permanency planning as the main aim of the public care is that the child should return back to their biological parents (Andersson 1999). She further argued that when the judgment of the care of children in out of home care is taken, the ultimate goal of the care of these children is reunification. This is also because of the Swedish guarantee of non-fixed ongoing family support to the families which requires the child to be in the care of the biological family (ibid).

This study clearly pointed out the coercion in policy implementation of reunification as many social workers are faced with individualized problems of the biological family and the child. In this study it was also stated that the aim of the policy is reunification but due to the personalized problems of the biological family, it often takes long time or it seldom happens. The voices of the social workers also indicated that there is a challenge in the new paradigm of child protection services program in Sweden. The “one-size-fits-all” model of the governmental policy on reunification can be difficult to be implemented in all the foster care cases due to the vast and differentiated needs and problems within the individualized family system (Waldfogel, 2001:93).

However, the study also found that though reunification is the ultimate goal, reunification practice process lacks clear mandate on how long does the family need to be rehabilitated so that the child can go back to the parent or how long is the child going to stay in the foster care (Andersson, 1999). As the social workers suggested, it is not always easy on the level of social workers to decide whether the child can go back to the parent as it is up to the politician’s review of the care plan after every six months (ibid). In this study the voices of the social workers also indicated that there is a lack of attention and sufficient support to the biological family after the removal of the child although reunification is the ultimate goal.

### *7.1.3 The more contact between parent and the child, easier the reunification*

This study explicitly pointed out that contact of the child with the biological parents either physical or emotional is crucial in making the reunification easier, faster and safer. Social workers viewed contact as the most important component while the child is placed in foster care. Previous studies also pointed out that frequent and stable contact with the biological parent while the child is in foster care is increasingly recognized (Triseliotis et al. 1995 cited in Andersson 1999). This study found that Swedish social workers are very conscious about the importance of contact and have complied within their professional boundaries to develop the contact between the child and the parents in an organized mode. The social workers told that they experienced that the quality contact between the child and the parents, if administered through the organized visitation and communication, made the reunification easier.

They also argued that contact develops attachment and repairs the emotional anxiety of the child and the parents when they were separated. The social workers are aware of the importance of contact while recruiting the foster family who would accept the contact between the child and biological parents. The quality attachment between the parent and the child which was broken once due to separation can be repaired through the quality of interaction and the feeling of security can be achieved through stable availability of the parent which Bowlby called as 'secure base' (Howe 1995). Thus, it can be concluded from this study that social workers experienced the attachment feeling of the child as the psychological predisposition, which is detrimental in making the reunification faster, easier and safer. The child who is attached to foster parent can also be attached to biological parent and vice versa (Howe, 1995).

#### *7.1.4 Multiple factors affecting the reunification process*

The aim of this study was also to examine the environmental factors, which could affect the reunification process in both a positive and negative manner. The participants were asked to share their experiences of where factors both in the system of the biological parents (target system) as well as in the system of service delivery (action system) which would ease or obstruct the reunification possibility. This study found that the consideration of the factors present in the biological family's environment is vital while making the decision of reunification. Three factors were significant in the reunification decision viz. mental and motivational factors, physical and financial factors and other social factors as discussed in chapter 6. As the social workers suggested during the study the assessment of a parent's ability to support the child and having extensive social networks to help sustain the child in the family after being placed back is important when deciding upon the possibility of reunification. However the motivational factors played a vital role in making the reunification process easier. Pelton (1994) is also of the view that economic hardships and unstable physical infrastructure often becomes the detrimental factors for parents to get their child back (cited in Eamon and Kopels, 2004). As the social workers pointed out during this study parent's motivation to work towards the improvement of their circumstances is more important than the parent's physical ability to provide in the child's needs. However, the lack of intensive focus of the social workers to address the needs of biological parents can also be counted as a barrier to reunification. Furthermore, the inability to cope with the service utilization by the parents was also detrimental to reunification (Miller et al. 2006). From the point of view of the biological parent in this study the reunification services offered to them are not sufficient and often not motivated. However this study could not cover the views of other stakeholders engaged in reunification for a balanced view in this regard. There is a need for a more in-depth study on the factors within the reunification services delivery process to have a fair view regarding this.

#### *7.1.5 Co-operation is decisive for reunification*

In our study, we examined the cooperation between the different parties involved in the reunification process which include cooperation between childcare social worker and the foster family social worker, co-operation between the biological parents and the social workers. Respondents who participated in this study had mixed opinions with regards to the cooperation between the social workers. Some childcare social workers complained that the foster family social workers don't listen often to the childcare social workers as foster family social workers have longer experience compared to the childcare social workers. This also was dominated due to them having different priorities. On the other hand, the social workers

stated that the cooperation between the social workers and the biological parents is also problematic due to their tight schedules and attitudes of the biological parents to social workers as 'evil' and attitudes of the social workers towards biological parents as 'problem makers'. Such rival relationships which is obvious when the parents feel threatened due to the removal of the child, restricts the biological parents and the social workers to open up for dialogue and full information which compromises on the quality of the child protection and reunification too (Drake, 1994 cited in Boer & Coady 2007). There are also many obstacles to enhance the cordial working relationship due to the unavailability of the social workers to attentively listen to the voices of the parents due to high case loads (Koeske and Koeske 1989 cited in De Boer and Coady 2007). This study also pointed out the power hierarchy between the social workers and negative attitudes of the social workers towards biological parents as the possible reason of poor cooperation. Based on our interview with the biological parent, good case handover in the situation where the social worker retires from the care responsibility to another social worker also proved to be important in increasing the satisfaction level of the parent.

#### *7.1.6 Unregulated post reunification services*

Post reunification services are vital in preventing re-entry back into the system. The aim of examining the post reunification services was to find out how sustainable would the reunification be without planned and continuous service delivery once the child has been placed back into the care of the biological parents. As the social workers stated during this study, the post reunification services to biological parents to keep the child within the system and to prevent the re-entry is important but has received little attention from the social services agencies. This study also found that it is up to the parent whether to accept the social workers' help after the child is placed back. The current system of receiving voluntary post reunification services by the parents leaves protection loopholes whereby the social workers cannot access and continuously support the family due to the lack of mandated post reunification support services. From the interview with the biological parent it is also evident that she is in need of continuous support by social workers in order to prevent re-entry of her children back into the care system. Therefore, regulated post-reunification services should be mandatory in the entire care planning process for at least a year as the study found that parents are sometime so overwhelmed by their new responsibility of taking care of their children which could result in a relapse e.g. drug abuse, triggering the re-entry of the child back into the foster care system.

#### *7.1.7 Measurable criteria for reunification*

The most significant assessment tool found in the study is the use of measurable criteria for reunification, which helped social workers to make decisions in terms of reunification. The Integrated Children System (ICS) which is widely known as BBIC which we have discussed in earlier chapters has been the assessment tool social workers applied when making the decision about the probability of reunification. The tool has been used as a conceptual framework for professionals to assess the needs of the child and the capacity of the parents. All the social workers irrespective of regions and responsibilities (either foster family social workers or childcare social workers) have extensively used the integrated children's system (ICS). However this study could not conclude from the empirical data whether efficient assessment is decisive in reunification due to the unavailability of the research in this field in Sweden or lack of accessibility to the research as most of the previous research and tools are yet to be translated into English. The argument for this is that it is up to the social workers

attitudes and efficiency and organizational capacity of the agency which were proved to be decisive in our study. However, this can not be claimed as representative as our respondents are limited and the region is narrow. On the other hand, we did not find the available research on whether the reunification or care efficiency in the parental home has been increased due to the use of BBIC.

## **7.2 Concluding remarks:**

The overall aim of this study was to examine the type of services being rendered to the biological parents whose children has been placed in foster care and how service delivery could affect the outcome of the reunification process. Based on the findings gained from the study, it is clear that although Sweden has adopted the highly acclaimed 'integrated children's system' the outcome for children and families in the foster care system remain a difficulty in terms of reunification. The inability of social workers to prioritise service delivery towards biological parents is indirect opposition of the reunification process as the failure to address problems that existed prior to removal are not sufficiently dealt with, which in turn would make it impossible for children to return back home.

Furthermore, one can see a visible dilemma among the social workers about whether they should work in preserving the family by reintegrating the child in the family which would sometimes results in cases of extreme abuse and neglect of children, or protect the children's basic needs and care by removing the child immediately from the custody of irresponsible parents at the expense of the natural rights of children to be cared for in the biological family. Either issue can always be an agenda of academic discussion in the area of child protection services but the unheard parents and often voiceless children silently are calling on the social workers to work more towards providing individualized support services to parents when the child is still within the custody of their parents to prevent entry into the public care system and when placed in the public care system rigorous efforts be made to work towards reunification. It is an undeniable fact that children's right to be with their responsible parents is 'in the best interest of the child' which should be the first priority when delivering services.

In conclusion, from the results obtained from this study it is evident that if we are willing and able to address these barriers such as the lack of providing the necessary services to our 'forgotten' clients, the biological parent, and are willing to work together in co-operation with other systems (childcare social workers, foster family social workers, biological parents, foster parents) involved in the process, maybe then reunification can become a possibility instead of remaining as an impossible dream.

### **7.1.1 Recommendations:**

From the outcome of this study the following are recommended:

- Although the empirical data obtained from the biological parent can not be seen as representative it does advocate for the need for future research on the experiences of biological parents whose children are placed in the public care system in terms of their experiences of service delivery.
- It is suggested that we as social workers in the field should include the views and opinions of service users by listening to them when evaluating services delivered in terms of their needs and the outcomes for reunification.
- Although Sweden had very little success in terms of reunification their efforts in trying to preserve the family before placing the child in foster care as a last resort is

admirable. By offering the service of a contact family shows that on community level people are working together by supporting vulnerable children and families. This is an intervention method that could be implemented in other countries such as South Africa and Nepal.

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## **APPENDIX A**

### **Letter of Informed Consent**

The following is a presentation of how we will use the data collected in the interview.

The research project is a part of our education in the International Masters program in Social Work at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden. In order to insure that our project meets the ethical requirements for good research we promise to adhere to the following principles:

- Interviewees in the project will be given information about the purpose of the project.
- Interviewees have the right to decide whether he or she will participate in the project, even after the interview has been concluded.
- The collected data will be handled confidentially and will be kept in such a way that no unauthorized person can view or access it.

The interview will be recorded as this makes it easier for us to document what is said during the interview and also helps us in the continuing work with the project. In our analyze some data may be changed so that no interviewee will be recognized. After finishing the project the data will be destroyed. The data we collect will only be used in this project.

You have the right to decline answering any questions, or terminate the interview without giving an explanation.

You are welcome to contact us or our supervisor in case you have any questions (e-mail addresses below).

#### **Student name & e-mail**

Tirtha Rasaili  
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#### **Supervisor name & e-mail**

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## **APPENDIX B (1)**

### **Semi-structured Interview Guide for childcare social workers**

Expected time of interview: 1 hour

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*Below is a general guideline that we will use to conduct our interviews with the childcare social workers who are selected to participate.*

#### **A. Introduction**

- Welcome participant and introduce the research staff present.
- Explain the general purpose of the interview discussion and why the interviewee was chosen.
- Explain the presence and purpose of recording equipment such as video recorder which we will use during the interview
- Address the issue of confidentiality.
- Invite the participant to introduce herself/himself

#### **B. Interview**

*A semi-structured interview will be conducted during the interview. Based on the previous literature and the application of the System and Attachment Theory as well as the aims and objectives formulated for the Study, we have formulated certain themes on which the interview questions will be focused.*

*Themes*

- I. Importance of contact between the biological family and foster child during pre-reunification period (Attachment theory)*
- II. Importance of different factors in the family environment in the and pre and post reunification period (System Theory)*
- III. What are the strengths and weaknesses of family reunifications services in terms of family needs, service delivery and its outcomes?*
- IV. Types of services rendered to the biological families in the post reunification period*
- V. Criteria needed for reunification to take place*
- VI. Co-operation between all parties concerned*
- VII. Challenges faced*

Begin by drawing out respondent's initial thoughts on the subject of reunifying foster children with their biological families. What is family reunification and is it underpinned by specific legislation? Is it known by any other terms?

Then move on to ask questions based on prepared themes.

**I. Importance of contact between the biological family and foster child during pre-reunification period (Attachment theory)**

**Relevant questions on this theme**

*We ask follow questions depending on the information provided by the interviewee*

**II. Importance of different factors in the family environment in the and pre and post reunification period (System Theory)**

- As a social worker you utilize certain strategies which include formal (other organizations) and informal (friends and families) to support the biological families in order to solve problems that existed prior to the removal of the child. Could you explain by means of a case study/ examples how you utilized these various systems?
- What are the criteria needed before deciding upon the reunification of the foster child back into the biological family?
- When the thematic area has been explored adequately, we move on to the next item, probing for connections between items, and asking for additional items not on the list, or rejection of items not considered relevant.

**III. What are the strengths and weaknesses of family reunifications services in terms of family needs, service deliver and its outcomes?**

- Do any evaluation strategies exist in order to determine and monitor the progress of the reunification process?
- What are your suggestions to improve the existing family reunification program being utilized?
- Ask if they can give examples of cases they have dealt with ( anonymously)

**IV. Types of services rendered to the biological families in the post reunification period**

- Ask him/her to comment on their experience of the existing reunification programs offered to biological families. Ask them to comment on the various reunification programs offered and their limitations and successful sides.

**VI. Criteria needed for reunification to take place**

- What criteria do you consider when deciding upon reunification?
- Ask if they can give examples of cases they have dealt with ( anonymously)

**V. Co-operation between all parties concerned**

- How do you view the co-operation between
  - The childcare and foster family social worker,
  - The biological parent and the social worker

**VI. Challenges faced**

- What are the challenges faced with the implementation of family reunification services and how are they dealt with?
- Could you give a case /example of the most challenging reunification situation which you have been faced with?

*C. Closing*

- **Thank you for your co-operation!!**
-

## **APPENDIX B (2)**

### **Semi-structured Interview Guide for foster family social workers**

Expected time of interview: 1 hour

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*Below is a general guideline that we will use to conduct our interviews with the childcare social workers who are selected to participate.*

#### **A. Introduction**

- Welcome participant and introduce the research staff present.
- Explain the general purpose of the interview discussion and why the interviewee was chosen.
- Explain the presence and purpose of recording equipment such as video recorder which we will use during the interview
- Address the issue of confidentiality.
- Invite the participant to introduce herself/himself

#### **B. Interview**

*A semi-structured interview will be conducted during the interview. Based on the previous literature and the application of the System and Attachment Theory as well as the aims and objectives formulated for the Study, we have formulated certain themes on which the interview questions will be focused.*

*Themes*

**VIII. *Importance of contact between the biological family and foster child during pre-reunification period (Attachment theory)***

**IX. *Importance of different factors in the family environment in the and pre and post reunification period (System Theory)***

**X. *What are the strengths and weaknesses of family reunifications services in terms of family needs, service deliver and its outcomes?***

**XI. *Co-operation between all parties concerned***

**XII. *Challenges faced***

Begin by drawing out respondent's initial thoughts on the subject of reunifying foster children with their biological families. What is family reunification and is it underpinned by specific legislation? Is it known by any other terms?



Then move on to ask questions based on prepared themes.

**VII. Importance of contact between the biological family and foster child during pre-reunification period (Attachment theory)**

**Relevant questions on this theme**

*We ask follow questions depending on the information provided by the interviewee*

**VIII. Importance of different factors in the family environment in the and pre and post reunification period (System Theory)**

- As a social worker you utilize certain strategies which include formal (other organizations) and informal (friends and families) to support the biological families in order to solve problems that existed prior to the removal of the child. Could you explain by means of a case study/ examples how you utilized these various systems?
- What are the criteria needed before deciding upon the reunification of the foster child back into the biological family?
- When the thematic area has been explored adequately, we move on to the next item, probing for connections between items, and asking for additional items not on the list, or rejection of items not considered relevant.

**IX. What are the strengths and weaknesses of family reunifications services in terms of family needs, service deliver and its outcomes?**

- Do any evaluation strategies exist in order to determine and monitor the progress of the reunification process?
- What are your suggestions to improve the existing family reunification program being utilized?
- Ask if they can give examples of cases they have dealt with ( anonymously)

**X. Co-operation between all parties concerned**

- How do you view the co-operation between
  - The childcare and foster family social worker,
  - The biological parent and the social worker

**XI. Challenges faced**

- What are the challenges faced with the implementation of family reunification services and how are they dealt with?
- Could you give a case /example of the most challenging reunification situation which you have been faced with?

## C. Closing

**Thank you for your co-operation!**

## **APPENDIX B (3)**

Semi-structured Interview Guide for the biological parents

Expected time of interview: 1 hour

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*Below is a general guideline that we will use to conduct our interviews with biological parents who are selected to participate.*

### **A. Introduction**

- Welcome participant and introduce the research staff present.
- Explain the general purpose of the interview discussion and why the interviewee was chosen.
- Explain the presence and purpose of recording equipment such as video recorder which we will use during the interview
- Address the issue of confidentiality.
- Invite the participant to introduce herself/himself

### **B. Interview**

*A semi-structured interview will be conducted during the interview. Based on the previous literature and the application of the System and Attachment Theory as well as the aims and objectives formulated for the Study, we have formulated certain themes on which the interview questions will be focused.*

Themes:

- XIII. *Importance of contact between the biological family and foster child during the child's stay in foster care (Attachment theory)***
- XIV. *Factors in the family environment in pre and post reunification period that made it difficult to overcome problems and factors that helped her to overcome problem (addiction) (System Theory)***
- XV. *Experience of services rendered to the biological family when the children were placed in foster care (pre reunification period)***
- XVI. *Co-operation between parent and social worker while children were placed in care.***
- XVII. *Types of services rendered to the biological family after the children has been placed back (post reunification period)***

### ***XVIII. Challenges faced***

Begin by drawing out respondent's initial thoughts on the subject of the process of having her children being placed in foster care and the process to be reunited again. Then move on to ask questions based on prepared themes.

### ***XII. Importance of contact between the biological family and foster child during pre-reunification period (Attachment theory)***

#### **Relevant questions on this theme**

*We ask follow up questions depending on the information provided by the interviewee*

### ***XIII. Importance of different factors in the family environment in the and pre and post reunification period (System Theory)***

- What things made it easier or difficult for you to work on your problems?

### ***XIV. Experience of services rendered to the biological family when the children were placed in foster care (pre reunification period)***

- What type of services did the social worker offer you in order to solve the problems that existed in your family prior to the removal of your children?  
Could you give example of how you were assisted?
- What do you think were needed in order for you to be reunified with your child?

### ***XV. Co-operation***

- Are you part of the decision making process. If not, do you think you need to participate?
- Do you think your social worker encourages you to participate in contact meetings?

### ***XVI. Types of services rendered to the biological family after the children has been placed back (post reunification period)***

- What are the services you may need after the child has been placed back into your care?
- When the thematic area has been explored adequately, we move on to the next item, probing for connections between items, and asking for additional items not on the list, or rejection of items not considered relevant.

### ***XVII. Challenges faced***

- What are the challenges faced by you after the child has been placed back/or before the child has been placed back and how are they dealt with?

## **C. Closing**

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