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Measures to Ensure That Social Workers Render Holistic Family Reunification Services: A South African Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Placement of children in alternative care is supposed to be a temporary arrangement while social workers address issues that led to the removal of a child from the care of the family. However, in the rendering of family reunification services (FRS), social workers encounter numerous challenges that hinder their ability and capacity to render effective and efficient services. Consequently, children stay longer in alternative care than needed. Based on an exploratory sequential mixed-methods study conducted at five child protection organisations in South Africa, the article highlights several measures to ensure that social workers render holistic FRS. Data for the qualitative phase of the study were gathered from 15 child protection social workers through interviews and analysed using Creswell's model of thematic data analysis. Data for the quantitative phase of the study were collected from 127 child protection social workers using questionnaires and analysed using the statistical package for the social sciences. Study findings indicate that the measures to ensure that social workers render holistic FRS are: the provision of resources for family reunification; the reduction of social workers' caseloads; the supervision and monitoring of social workers; in-service training of social workers; and adherence to the principles of family reunification. The article concludes that all identified measures should be put in place to enable social workers to render holistic and timely FRS, which increase the possibility of success of family reunification.

1 | Introduction

A family is the fundamental unit of a society that should guarantee the safety and well-being of a child. However, children at times get removed from their families and placed in alternative care (Sibanda 2025a). The removal of children is due to several reasons, ranging from abuse, neglect, abandonment, maltreatment, exploitation and displaying behavioural problems that cannot be controlled by biological parents (Kasherwa et al. 2024; Tladi and Sibanda 2025). In South Africa, trends show a significant number of children and young people entering the child protection system, with over 5.2 million abandoned children in need of care services (Walt 2018). The removal of children from parental care and subsequent placement in alternative care,

which may be foster care, kinship care or residential institutional care, happens after a social work investigation and the involvement of the children's courts (Sibanda and Ndamba 2023). When a child is in alternative care, social workers are mandated by the Children's Act 38 of 2005 to address the reasons that led to the removal of the child so that the child can be reunified with the family of origin. Reunification of a child with the family of origin is every child's basic human right (Sibanda 2025a).

South Africa has an estimated population of 62 million people. A third of them (21 million) are children under the age of 18 (Children's Institute 2025). Four million children do not live with their biological parents due to a variety of reasons, of which 2.7 million (65%) of those children are orphans (Children's

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Institute 2025). Some of the children not living with biological parents are in informal care arrangements with families and relatives, whilst others are in formal care arrangements such as foster care or a residential institution. According to Vivier (2023, 1), nearly 400 000 children in South Africa are in foster care. Life Changer (2025) notes that 22 000 children live in residential institutions.

Despite children's right to family life, as embodied in the Children Act 38 of 2005; 1996 Constitution of the Republic of South Africa and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and several regional and national declarations of most countries, fewer children are being reunited with their families of origin (Smith and Lidström 2020; Sibanda 2025b). South Africa does not have clear guidelines and models for rendering family reunification services (FRS). As such, most social workers encounter numerous challenges in rendering FRS, which undermine their capacity to render timely, comprehensive and efficient FRS (Sibanda and Lombard 2022). Smith and Lidström (2020) have described family reunification in South Africa as a difficult and lengthy process. Fernandez and Lee (2013) postulate that extended periods of time in alternative care can lead to difficulties in transitioning out of care. Goldman et al. (2020) report that globally, about 5–6 million children between the ages of 0 and 18 are placed in an institution of care. Epworth Children's Village (2015) notes that in South Africa, instead of rendering timely FRS, there is a tendency to keep children in alternative care permanently. In view of this background information, this article reports on the findings of a study on measures to ensure that social workers render holistic FRS.

1.1 | The UNCRC

Like most services in the basket of services for children in alternative care, the provision of FRS should reflect commitments and declarations that a country would have made to the international community. The most significant international framework in the provision of FRS is the UNCRC. This Convention provides international standards for rendering not only FRS but also child protection services in general. South Africa ratified the 1989 UNCRC in 1995, soon after becoming a constitutional democracy. Article 7 of the UNCRC protects the child's right to identification and to be cared for by the parent. Article 18(2) of the Convention imposes a duty on the state to support parents in caring for their children. Furthermore, Article 9(1) of the convention requires ratifying countries to ensure that children are separated from their parents only when it is in the child's best interest. Article 9(1) not only safeguards the best interests of the child but also directs that the removal of children from their parents must only be effected by competent and designated authorities, who should also be subject to a judicial review. Moreover, Article 9(3) of UNCRC states that such separation should be for the shortest possible period. If a child has been separated from family care, the child has a right to maintain contact with his or her family. As duty bearers and custodians of child protection, social workers should ensure that the provisions of the UNCRC are adhered to and that it is central in any decisions they make regarding the care and protection of the child. As such,

organisations and countries should put in place measures to ensure that social workers render holistic FRS to children in alternative care.

1.2 | Contextualisation of FRS

The Children's Act 38 of 2005 implies that social service delivery to children lies on a continuum of care that ranges from prevention to early intervention, statutory intervention and finally reunification and after-care services. Within a developmental approach, the continuum of care should rather be seen as an open system/cycle as opposed to a linear process (Department of Social Development 2013). This view aligns with the Integrated Service Delivery Model stating, '...whilst these levels seem to be distinct, a client may enter (or exit) the system at any of the levels and the levels may overlap in practice'. (Department of Social Development 2006, 18). Timely, efficient, effective and successful family reunifications are determined by decisions taken in the initial placement of a child into alternative care (Smith and Lidström 2020). During the initial placement of the child, logistical issues regarding the contact of parents with the child should be considered. If the child is placed in an area that is inaccessible to the biological parent, the parent may find it difficult to establish contact (Fernandez and Lee 2013). Minimal contact reduces the success of FRS (Sibanda 2025b).

Although the circumstances of children and families differ, calling for different types of services, the nature of family reunification service delivery must have similar basic principles (Sibanda and Lombard 2022). Similar characteristics should be visible in all FRS. An analysis of literature on FRS reveals the following characteristics: Firstly, FRS are provided to families who have gone through a statutory process that resulted in the removal of a child and subsequent placement of the child in alternative care through the children's court (Farmer 2018). Moreover, FRS refer to services rendered to empower members of the family to address the risk factors that necessitated the removal of the child (Sibanda 2025a). The services also seek to support family members to come to terms with the removal of the child (Fernandez and Lee 2013). In addition, the duration of FRS depends on the reasons that led to the removal of the child and on the ability of the family to address those reasons (Delfabbro and Fernandez 2024). Furthermore, the removal of a child from the family is a loss for both the child and the family (Smith and Lidström 2020). A child may experience feelings of being rejected by and detached from their family, and may have lost a sense of belonging (Morris et al. 2018). New relationships will have to be built between the child and the family. Lastly, regular contact between the child and the family needs to be maintained so that everyone learns to trust each other again (Sibanda 2025c). For biological parents, there may be feelings of guilt and inadequacy. The removal of a child from the parents carries a negative reflection on the capabilities and skills of the parents (Chamberlain 2017).

Social workers must be aware of the above-mentioned characteristics so they can render effective FRS to children and their families. Failure to comprehend the basic characteristics of FRS

results in social workers rendering inappropriate and inefficient services and subsequently failing to engage children and families (Sibanda and Lombard 2022). Another key activity that social workers should focus on when rendering FRS is family engagement. Family engagement plays a central role in family reunification. It ensures that the social worker, the family of origin, the foster family, and the child have a common understanding of reunification goals, activities and timelines. The dimensions of family engagement entail the caseworker-family relationship, the parent-child visitation and the involvement of foster parents.

1.2.1 | Relationship Between the Social Worker and the Family

The frequency and nature of the social worker's contact with the family are important in facilitating meaningful FRS. According to the Children's Bureau (2010), regular contact between the social worker and the family enables family reunification. In a study analysing 411 children who spent 3 years in alternative care, social worker engagement with the family was positively associated with permanency outcomes of family reunification (Cheng 2010). However, the challenge is that parents are sometimes mistrustful of child welfare social workers and blame them for the removal of the child; thus, they are unwilling to cooperate, share information or establish a relationship with the social workers (Nhedzi and Makofane 2015). Family engagement becomes significant when family members believe that their participation in case planning and services is appreciated and respected; when family engagement provides them with the information they need to successfully advocate for themselves and their children; and when it enables them to access the services and resources they need to achieve reunification (Lombard 2019). The relationship between a case worker and the biological parents is further strengthened if the case worker advocates for competent legal representation of the birth parents. Legal representation is vital in that it enables families to take a more effective role in court proceedings.

A good relationship between the social worker and the family is the strongest predictor of the family's engagement. According to Sibanda (2025c), the following behaviours of social workers are important in alleviating families' fears and building the rapport necessary for effective engagement: (1) Establishing open, honest communication with parents. (2) Requesting family participation and feedback in the planning process. (3) Providing instruction and reinforcement in the performance and completion of mutually agreed-upon activities. Morris et al. (2018) state that social workers should be relationship-driven and should be able to put people at ease and relate to them regardless of their background. Social workers should support, empower and empathise with families' experiences without wanting to 'jump in' and 'fix' the situation, while also being able to 'read' when families are reaching a crisis point (Morris et al. 2018, 18). A positive relationship between social workers and biological parents should be characterised by trust, transparency, mutual respect and doing what is in the best interests of the child (Sibanda 2025a).

The failure to build a relationship with families undermines the success of FRS.

1.2.2 | Parent-Child Visitation

Parent-child visitation is a significant predictor of the reunification of a child in alternative care with the biological parents (Delfabbro and Fernandez 2024). A study of family reunification found that children who were visited by their mothers were more likely to be reunited with them (McKendrick and Finch 2016). Visiting maintains the connection between parent and child during placement and allows the social worker to assess the readiness of parent and child for reunification. Effective visitation practice goes far beyond attention to the logistics of scheduling and transportation; it provides an opportunity to build parental skills and improve parent-child interaction. Visitation should have a psycho-social focus. Thus, any social worker who supervises visits must have knowledge and skills on how to do therapeutic work with families.

Arranging visits between children in alternative care and biological parents goes a long way in building relationships, which requires high levels of patience, trust and transparency. Visits between children and parents should not be limited to short visits in the agency office. According to Sibanda (2025c), some of the components of parent-child visiting that can lead to reunification are as follows: (1) Structuring visits in ways that enhance opportunities for parents to practise and enhance their caregiving skills. (2) Scheduling visits at the home of foster families at times that include increasingly more challenging situations, such as mealtimes and bedtimes, and for longer periods of time. (3) Including parents in activities that allow parents to be part of their children's lives, such as school activities, doctor appointments and recreational opportunities. (4) Encouraging foster parents to interact with biological parents.

Parent-child visiting must be applied in all forms of alternative care, including placements in both foster care and institutions. The Nashua Children's Home in New Hampshire provides services to children between the ages of six and 18 and considers family involvement to be the ingredient behind the success of their FRS programme (Nashua Children's Home 2016). At this residential care facility, it is not only children who visit the homes of their biological parents, but the biological parents also visit their children in the facility and join their children for activities such as family days, public holidays, heritage days and mealtimes (Nashua Children's Home 2016). Contact throughout the child's stay in alternative care ensures that parents remain involved in the lives of their children. According to Sibanda (2025a), reunifying a teenager who may be displaying behavioural problems is very difficult because the family becomes used to not having the child around. Good reunification programmes ensure that the family does not get comfortable with the child's absence (Freundlich and Wright 2014) by structuring visits in a way that guarantees the joint involvement of both the parent and the child in family activities. Parent-child visitation enables the parent and the child to be

in constant contact (Sibanda 2025a). This makes it possible for them to build a relationship and to form a bond, which are necessary ingredients of family reunification (Sibanda 2025a).

1.2.3 | The Involvement of Foster Parents

Foster parents may facilitate family reunification through both mentoring the biological parents and supporting their visitation. The development of a positive relationship between the foster parents and biological parents may allow children to avoid the stress of divided loyalties (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2012). Practice experience shows that some family reunification efforts fail because the child sees a relationship with the biological parents as a betrayal of the foster parents and vice versa. At times, foster parents become overprotective and develop a tendency to discourage children in their care from having contact and a relationship with their biological parents, and they often remind the children of the reasons why the children were removed from the care of their biological parents (Sibanda 2025b). Therefore, when recruiting and selecting foster parents, social workers must consider foster parents' experience, maturity, intention, communication skills, ability to handle multiple roles and the possible need for additional training.

In addition, foster parents should be made aware of the fact that foster care is a temporary placement option for children, whilst the families of origin are attempting to address the reasons that would have led to the removal of the child (Sibanda 2025b). Foster parents should be prepared to facilitate, and not obstruct, reunification efforts, since the goal of every child in alternative care is to be reunified with the family or community of origin. Making foster parents equal partners in the permanency team, which comprises social workers, biological parents, children and other significant professionals, empowers foster parents to step up and participate in working with biological parents towards the goal of reunification. Foster parents, who facilitate parent-child visiting, teach and mentor birth parents in parenting skills, and participate in placement conferences, contribute to the reunification effort (Sibanda 2025c). The 'family to family initiative' of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, America, uses the idea of 'building bridges' to represent the process of spanning the gap between foster parents and biological parents (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2016). The foundation lists four stages of contact, namely basic meetings, meetings on neutral territory, visits to the biological family's home, and the biological family visiting the child at the foster family's home (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2016). Foster parents' involvement in the reunification process makes them stakeholders, thus providing an opportunity for them to network and build a relationship with the significant others, and to contribute positively to family reunification efforts.

2 | Methodology

The research question for the study was: What measures can be put in place to ensure that social workers render holistic FRS in South Africa? The study used a mixed-methods research approach and an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell 2014). This design enabled the researcher to first gain

an insight and understanding into the perspectives and experiences of social workers by using explorative qualitative methods to identify qualitative themes. Based on the qualitative information, the researcher then applied quantitative research methods to gather more information from social workers. The study explored the measures to ensure that social workers render holistic FRS by asking 'what', 'how' and 'why' questions.

The study was conducted at five child protection organisations (CPOs) based in the Gauteng Province, South Africa. The organisations were selected using purposive sampling; each of the five selected organisations has more than 50 years of service delivery experience in the field of child protection. Moreover, they render services not only in urban areas but also in rural and peri-urban areas, including farming and mining towns. The researcher first wrote to the management of the organisations to seek permission to conduct the study. Upon acceptance of the request, the management furnished the researcher with a list of social workers in the employment of participating organisations. The list contained the contact details of participants; he then contacted them and requested them to participate in the study. Those who agreed to participate were then sent the letter of informed consent that they had to complete before the interview sessions.

At the time of the study, 183 social workers were in the employment of participating organisations. It was not feasible to include the entire population in a qualitative study. Therefore, the researcher utilised a non-probability sampling technique, namely purposive sampling, to select a sample of social workers, based on their willingness and availability to participate in the study; having at least 2 years' experience in providing FRS; serving different population groups in terms of race, culture, religion, beliefs and social status; and being in the employment of participating organisations for at least 1 year. In line with the exclusion criteria set out in Patino and Ferreira (2018), participants who did not sign a letter of informed consent and who were not available during the time of data collection were excluded from the study. Data reached saturation after interviewing 15 Social workers; that is, when the researcher started to notice that information was becoming repetitive, as no new themes could be constructed from the interviews (Creswell 2014). For the quantitative study, the researcher applied total population sampling and targeted 183 respondents from all five organisations to complete the questionnaire. However, only 69.4% (127 out of 183) of respondents participated in the study and, accordingly, completed and returned the questionnaires. Despite numerous reminders, 30.6% (56 out of 183) of social workers did not complete the questionnaires. However, the response rate was generally good; literature states that a questionnaire with 9–14 questions has an average completion rate of 56.28% (Liu and Wronski 2017, 117).

The researcher collected data for the qualitative phase of the study by means of one-on-one semi-structured interviews. During interviewing sessions, the researcher made use of open-ended questions and was able to probe, paraphrase, seek clarity and follow up on interesting issues that emerged. With permission from participants, the researcher recorded data from interviews using an audio recorder. The advantage of doing this was to ensure verbatim recording and, at the same time, enable the researcher to communicate, listen and probe participants attentively. For the quantitative phase of the study, the researcher

used a self-administered questionnaire to collect data. The researcher developed a questionnaire and then hand-delivered it to the organisations where the 183 respondents work. The researcher asked directors of respective organisations to provide a name list and email addresses of all social workers, and then, from time to time, he would email them a reminder to complete the questionnaires. The researcher gave social workers a period of 2 months to complete the questionnaire prior to visiting the organisations again to collect completed questionnaires.

In analysing qualitative data, the researcher utilised Creswell's (2014) model of thematic data analysis, which entailed familiarisation of data, generating initial codes, constructing themes and producing the report. The researcher enhanced the trustworthiness of qualitative data through strategies that enhanced data credibility, reflexivity, transferability and confirmability. The researcher increased the credibility of the data through prolonged and repeated interviews until data saturation occurred. In addition, he read interview transcripts numerous times to enable him to capture accurate descriptions of the experiences as reported by the social workers. Moreover, to ensure rigour and transferability of data, the researcher described the research setting (context).

To ensure confirmability, the researcher provided a detailed description of the methodological process and ensured that the data were well recorded. The researcher tried to be neutral and to avert any potential bias by seeking the opinions of the study supervisor to determine whether she agreed or disagreed with the researcher's analysis and interpretation of data. As part of reflexivity, it is important to note that the researcher has worked as a family reunification social worker for many years. As such, the researcher guarded against potential researcher bias by keeping a reflection journal that he used to do deeper self-introspection and consider how his prior knowledge of FRS, values and perceptions might have impacted his ability to interpret and understand the experiences of participants.

In analysing data from the questionnaires, the researcher used a computer-based statistical software programme, specifically Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23, to enter data and perform statistical analysis. The researcher strove to ensure the reliability and validity of data. The questionnaire was designed in such a way that it yielded enough data to allow the researcher to draw sound conclusions. The researcher enhanced the reliability of the questionnaire as a data gathering instrument by using multiple questions on key variables, clarifying concepts and providing clear instructions to the respondents. The researcher further enhanced the questionnaire's reliability by conducting a pilot test to ascertain whether the questionnaire presented relevant responses to answer the research questions and meet the objectives of the study.

Throughout the research process, the researcher maintained an active awareness and adherence to ethical considerations, namely, avoidance of harm and avoiding deception. The researcher strove to ensure confidentiality, anonymity and privacy of participants by treating interview transcripts and questionnaires as confidentially as possible. The researcher used codes to present the data. As such, no comments could be linked to specific participants and respondents. Raw data, transcriptions

and recordings are securely stored for a minimum of 15 years at the Department of Social Work and Criminology, University of Pretoria. The participants gave informed consent to participate in the study, and the study received ethical clearance (Reference number: 20160932HS) from the Faculty of Humanities, University of Pretoria, South Africa.

3 | Findings

3.1 | Demographic Details of Study Participants

The characteristics of participants in the qualitative study are presented first, followed by the characteristics of participants in the quantitative study (Table 1).

Of the 127 participants who participated in the quantitative study, 20% (26 of 127) were male and 80% (101 of 127) were female. 43% (54 of 127) of the participants were between the ages of 20 and 29, whereas 36% (46 of 127) were between the ages of 30 and 39; 17% (21 of 127) were between the ages of 40 and 49; while 4% (6 of 127) were between the ages of 50 and 59 respectively. In terms of race, 17 (13.4%) participants were white, 104 (81.9%) were black and six (4.7%) were of mixed heritage. In terms of experience in rendering FRS, 66.4% (83 of 125) had between 0.3 and 7 years of FRS experience; 22.4% (28 of 125) had eight to 14 years, while 11.2% (14 of 125) of social workers had more than 15 years of FRS experience.

3.2 | Measures to Ensure That Social Workers Render Holistic Services to Children and Families

Participants highlighted measures that can be put in place to ensure that social workers render holistic FRS. The measures are: allocation of resources for family reunification; reduction of social workers' caseloads; supervision and monitoring of social workers; in-service training for social workers; and adherence to the principles of family reunification. These findings are presented below.

3.2.1 | The Provision of Resources for Family Reunification

Most of the participants, that is, 95.5% (119 of 124) in a quantitative study, indicated that to ensure that social workers render holistic FRS, the government departments and CPOs should provide resources to enable them to render holistic FRS. The resources that participants should have access to include telephones, cars and computers. Participants in a qualitative study shared similar views, as indicated below.

I think we need to have enough resources from the government and the Department of Social Development. As a reunification worker, I need to have adequate resources to render FRS and to contact and visit family members

(Participant 2).

TABLE 1 | Characteristics of participants in the qualitative study.

Participant	Gender	Age group (years)	Racial group	Years of employment at a CPO	Years of experience in FRS
P1	Male	30–39	Black	7	3
P2	Female	20–29	Black	2	2
P3	Female	20–29	Black	2	2
P4	Female	50–59	White	18	18
P5	Male	40–49	White	8	13
P6	Female	20–29	Black	2	5
P7	Female	20–29	Mixed heritage	5	5
P8	Female	30–39	Black	5	4
P9	Female	40–49	Black	8	6
P10	Female	20–29	White	3	3
P11	Female	50–59	White	20	10
P12	Female	30–39	Black	6	7
P13	Female	30–39	Black	5	7
P14	Female	20–29	Black	3	3
P15	Female	20–29	Black	5	5

Our organisations should provide resources for us to be able to render reunification services. We need resources like cars; we should not be limited with regard to our travelling. We need resources that make us flexible, you know. When you are investigating the home circumstances of someone, you need to be there to see it for yourself. So, we need resources such as cars, petrol and money for us to travel. We also need computers so that we can type (write) our reports

(Participant 3).

So, I think that it would be good to reduce the caseloads of social workers so that they can give proper attention to all family reunification cases. If you are having a few cases, then you will be able to focus and do things appropriately

(Participant 6)

Quantitative findings align with qualitative findings, indicating that 87.9% (119 of 124) of participants were of the view that for social workers to render holistic FRS, they should have a caseload of no more than 50 files.

3.2.2 | The Reduction of Social Workers' Caseloads

To enable social workers to render holistic FRS, some participants were of the view that more time should be made available for social workers since they need enough time to build relationships with children, families and all stakeholders in the family reunification process. They stated that social workers would have more time when their caseloads were reduced to feasible and manageable sizes. The voices of participants regarding this suggestion were:

Time can be created by reducing the number of caseloads. We experience pressure because there is a huge caseload. So, if the caseload is reduced, time can be devoted to a certain number of cases, and that will provide the opportunity to work comprehensively on a case and do in-depth interventions

(Participant 4)

3.2.3 | The Supervision and Monitoring of Social Workers

Participants were of the view that putting supervision, monitoring, evaluation and accountability measures in place enables social workers to render holistic FRS. These sentiments are reflected in the following quotations:

Family reunification social workers should be evaluated every six months based on the family reunification service cases that they have. Someone must see to it that they (social workers) do their job. There should be systems in place for social workers to evaluate themselves to see whether they have reached the reunification goals that they would have set for themselves

(Participant 8)

The supervisor must give timely return dates for certain cases and programmes for FRS. For instance, the supervisor should state that there should be a parenting skills group once every three months

(Participant 10)

There should be some kind of a reunification order, which stipulates that the social worker must do this and this on a family reunification case, and if they don't, there should be serious consequences. This order will make them accountable and take responsibility for family reunification cases. Social workers will work hard when they know that they need to report to the court on the progress of family reunification

(Participant 14)

Quantitative findings support the qualitative findings, which indicate that 89.5% (111 of 124) of participants were of the view that for social workers to render holistic FRS, they should receive supervision once a month using case allocation cards. Of all the participants, 94.5% (119 of 126) indicated that another way of ensuring that social workers rendered holistic FRS was to put monitoring and evaluation tools in place to track progress towards family reunification according to agreed milestones. The accountability of social workers to render FRS was supported by 76.2% (96 of 126) of participants, indicating that it should be enforced by a yearly court-monitored FRS plan.

3.2.4 | In-Service Training of Social Workers

Training of social workers on how to render holistic FRS was supported by 89.7% (113 of 126) of participants, while 1.6% (2) of participants disagreed, and 8.7% (11) held a neutral view. Training social workers ensures that they are competent in providing comprehensive FRS, as reflected in the sentiments below.

Social workers should acquire knowledge and skills on how to render FRS and on how to work with

difficult parents. We should have a programme where the social worker must go for training on how to render effective FRS

(Participant 11).

There should be a standard operational procedure or working model for family reunification. We have a foster care manual, so I know exactly what is expected for foster care. We need to be trained on family reunification as well

(Participant 9).

There should be training regarding family reunification. I have attended so many foster care trainings up to now, but can you believe when I tell you that I have never attended any FRS training; I have never. Training sessions that are available are all about foster care and the Children's Act. There is nothing whatsoever for FRS

(Participant 3).

3.2.5 | Adherence to the Principles of Family Reunification

Though the qualitative study did not contribute any data on guiding principles for FRS, the quantitative study indicated several principles that social workers should adhere to when rendering FRS. As revealed in Figure 1 below, participants indicated these principles as: considering the views of the child (96.8%, 121 of 126); accessibility of services (94.5%, 119 of 126); empowerment of service users (93.6%, 118 of 126); locally relevant interventions (93.6%, 117 of 126); active participation of all role players (92%, 116 of 126); accountability of all stakeholders (92.8%, 117 of 126); transparency of the family (92.1%, 116 of 126); and cultural competency of the social worker (86.2%, 106 of 126).

A cross-tabulation of the principles applicable to family reunification and the number of children reunified with their families reveals that all principles identified above are significant

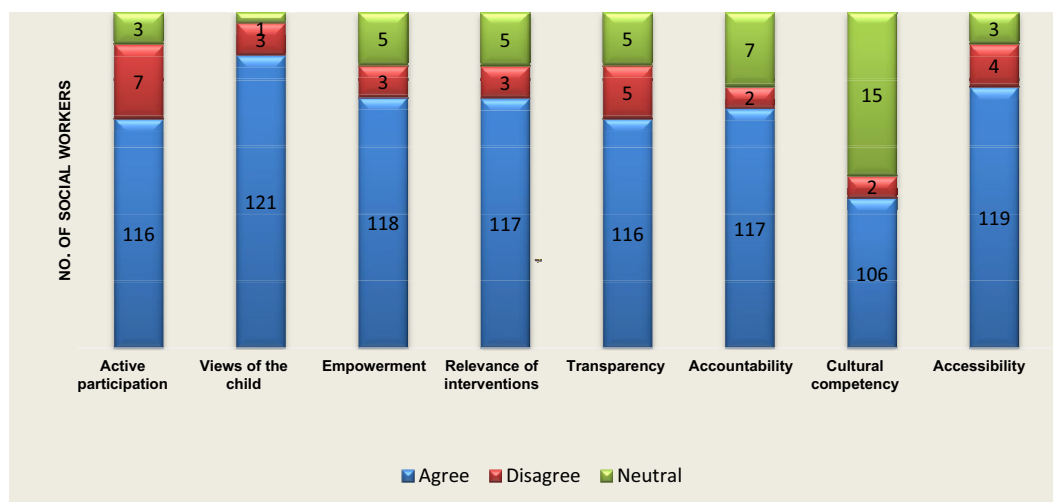


FIGURE 1 | Principles applicable to family reunification. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/chso.13014)]

TABLE 2 | Cross-tabulation of principles applicable to family reunification.

Applicable principle	Valid	Missing	Mean	Minimum	Maximum
Active participation of all role players	126	1	4.56	1	5
Considering the views of the child	125	2	4.66	1	5
Empowerment of service users	126	1	4.48	1	5
Locally relevant interventions	125	2	4.45	1	5
Transparency of the family reunification process	126	1	4.60	1	5
Accountability of all stakeholders	126	1	4.63	1	5
Accessibility of services	126	1	4.56	1	5
Cultural competency of the social worker	123	4	4.38	1	5

in rendering FRS. However, the most important principle is considering the views of the child (4.66), followed by the accountability of all stakeholders (4.63) and transparency in the family reunification process (4.60), as reflected in the following Table 2.

4 | Discussion

The study highlighted several measures that can be put in place to ensure that social workers render holistic FRS. The finding that the government should allocate resources for family reunification is supported in the literature by Herselman et al. (2023), who state that government departments, as duty bearers, should allocate resources for family reunification. However, the availability of resources alone does not determine whether family reunification will be successful or not (Sibanda 2025b). Although resources are needed in rendering FRS, resources themselves may not be the key aspect to ensure the reunification of a child. Other components also need to be in place, for example, positive relationships between foster parents and biological parents (Sibanda 2025c). In the absence of resources, family reunification can still occur. However, there is a need for social workers to improvise and find creative ways of rendering FRS (Sibanda 2025b). Gray et al. (2017) advocate for the shaping of relevant, culturally appropriate and socially responsive social work practice. Dominelli (2010) challenges social work practitioners not to be bogged down by the complexities arising from the lack of resources but to look for new paradigms for practice. If the services are not delivered due to a lack of resources, the rights-based approach outlines that rights holders (service users), duty bearers (social workers) and other stakeholders (civil society) have the right to hold the state accountable for the lack of service delivery (Androff 2016). The government should be held accountable for not availing the institutional and infrastructural resources needed in rendering FRS (Sibanda 2025b).

The findings regarding reducing the caseloads of social workers so that they have time to render holistic FRS corroborate De Villiers's (2008) view that a reduction in the caseload of social workers would enable them to render effective and intense FRS. A study by Nhedzi and Makofane (2015) found that social workers had insufficient contact with families due to high caseloads. As such, the authors recommend that, for social workers

to render effective and adequate services, their caseloads should be reduced to a manageable level (Nhedzi and Makofane 2015). Several scholars echoed similar sentiments regarding high caseloads and stated that heavy workloads compromise the reunification process as social workers take shortcuts to resolve cases, due to work pressure (Chadambuka and Chikadzi 2020; Herselman et al. 2023; Sibanda and Ngwabi 2025; Sibanda and Ndamba 2023). Roberts (2015) reveals that huge caseloads lead to insufficient contact with families, which exposes family members to further harm. A reduction of the caseload of social workers will enable them to put proper child participation mechanisms in place, which is important to build children's capacity (Sibanda 2025b).

The study found that monitoring and evaluation are vital to ensure that social worker renders holistic FRS and that services are implemented according to set tasks and that the objectives and goals are reached. Monitoring and evaluation are important in determining which goals the family has achieved, and which obstacles might prevent them from achieving a successful reunification (De Villiers 2008). The continuous monitoring and evaluation of foster children and biological parents will provide a social worker with new information throughout the alternative care process. Continuous evaluation enables the social worker to reassess objectives and possibly change the delivered intervention, if necessary (Delfabbro and Fernandez 2024). Ongoing monitoring and evaluation ensure that social workers are held accountable for reunifying children with their families (Sibanda 2025b). Accountability as a rights-based approach principle refers to compliance with legislation, policies and regulations (Androff 2016). Through regular and adequate supervision, social workers can be empowered to provide efficient and effective FRS.

Findings indicated that to render holistic FRS, social workers should be trained. This finding is supported in the literature by Patel et al. (2012), who pointed out that social workers should receive training on how to render services geared towards reunifying children with families. Information and knowledge on FRS can be disseminated through social work training at universities and via in-service training workshops for social workers who are already in the field (Sibanda 2025a). Sewpaul (2014) notes that social work education is geared towards ensuring that graduates have the requisite skills in empathy, active listening, facilitation,

mediation and interpersonal relationships. These skills contribute to social workers' preparedness to render appropriate services. A rights-based approach aims at strengthening the capabilities of duty bearers to deliver on their mandate of promoting and protecting the rights of rights holders (Androff 2016). This entails providing the necessary training for social workers to perform their tasks.

The study identified principles that social workers should adhere to render holistic FRS. These principles entail the following: accessibility of services, empowerment of service users, locally relevant interventions, active participation of all role players, accountability of all stakeholders, transparency to the family and cultural competency of the social worker. All identified principles are in line with the principles of a rights-based approach, as reflected in Androff (2016), DSD (2013), Patel (2015) and Sibanda (2025a). Social workers should be engaged in in-depth explanations of these principles and their subsequent relevance and application to the field of family reunification. By virtue of being principles, they are fundamental, guiding and express values that need to be translated into practice (Androff 2016; Sibanda and Ngwabi 2025). As such, the principles should be integrated into the holistic rendering of FRS to children and families.

5 | Conclusion

In conclusion, measures that should be in place to ensure that social workers render holistic FRS are: availing resources for family reunification; reducing the caseload of social workers; putting in place mechanisms that ensure the supervision, evaluation and accountability of social workers; training of social workers in reunification services; and setting guiding principles for social workers to render FRS. If all identified measures are in place, social workers' capacity to render holistic FRS may increase, which may translate into successful family reunification.

The implementation of a holistic FRS model requires well-thought-through institutional, infrastructural and human resource arrangements. As such, the following recommendations are made: (1) Well-designed and fit-for-purpose training packages should be organised for social workers. Such training should focus on how to implement FRS from a rights-based approach. (2) The government should play a leading role in availing resources needed for the implementation of holistic FRS. (3) Social workers should provide regular feedback to supervisors for monitoring and planning purposes, through the submission of monthly family reunification statistics and progress notes. (4) Further research should be conducted on how the principles of implementing holistic FRS can be translated into practice.

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Ethics Statement

The study received ethical clearance (Reference number: 20160932HS) from the Faculty of Humanities, University of Pretoria, South Africa.

Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because of ethical restrictions.

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Biography

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