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South African Social Workers' Perspectives on Positive Role Fulfilment Among Role Players Within the Foster Child's Care Circle of Supporting Wellbeing

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Abstract

Foster care placements involve various role players from the child's entry into the system through the child's exit. Positive role fulfilment implies acting in accordance with the respective role expectations while also being dynamic in nature. Key participants in the foster care system include social workers, foster parents, and foster children. These role players all have roles necessary for the foster care placement to be positive. Using role and identity theory, with an underlying Africentric philosophy, as a theoretical framework, this qualitative study sought to describe social workers' perspectives on positive role fulfilment among role players within the foster child's care circle in supporting well-being. Data were collected from twelve participants, comprising ten foster care social workers and two social work supervisors, through a focus group discussion and one-on-one interviews. In addition, two foster care policy developers were consulted as key stakeholders to provide contextual insight into the legislative and policy environment. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Findings showed that social workers face structural challenges, including high caseloads, a shortage of social workers and uncertainty regarding roles, which sometimes make it difficult to fulfil their roles as expected. With that said, they believed that positive role fulfilment influenced the positive nature of foster care placements. When roles are known and met, the care circle enhances the well-being of the foster child. The study concludes that social workers know what they are required to do for the child's well-being. The recommendation is that an Africentric foster care supervision and monitoring framework be developed to sensitise the role players of their roles and responsibilities in the foster care system.

Keywords: child protection; foster care roles; foster child; foster parents; role fulfilment; social workers; South Africa



Academic Editor: Joaquim J.F. Soares

Received: 21 March 2026

Revised: 22 July 2026

Accepted: 24 July 2026

Published: 27 July 2026

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1. Introduction

It has been noted that “a family is a fundamental unit of a society that should guarantee the safety and well-being of a child” [1]. However, despite trends that have produced a “mosaic of family formations” in South Africa and a strong tradition of kinship care in African contexts, families are not always able to ensure such safety and well-being [2]. This may result in children requiring state intervention and protection when they are deemed to be in need of care and protection [3]. Foster care, therefore, functions as an alternative care

placement within the child protection system [4]. According to UNICEF data, formal foster care is utilised in all regions globally, including 23 countries in the Africa and Middle East Region [5]. While many of these countries have established foster care systems, and others are in various stages of development, amongst all these contexts, the organisation, policies, and practices governing these systems differ across contexts [6,7].

Formal and informal kinship foster care is more prevalent in several contexts, especially in Africa [5], but also in Western contexts such as in some parts of Europe, the United States and Australia [8], reflecting the belief that children should be placed within family environments and adults with a kinship relationship, rather than institutional settings wherever possible. Similarly, kinship care forms a significant component of the foster care system in South Africa. Kruger clarifies that, within the South African context, kinship care generally refers to care of children by relatives or extended family members who are not biological parents of the child [9].

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa establishes that the state must respect, protect, promote, and fulfil the rights of all people in South Africa [10]. Importantly, the Constitution stipulates that every child has the right to family care or parental care, or to appropriate alternative care when removed from the family environment [10]. Once a child has been legally determined to require care and protection and placed in foster care, the foster parent becomes eligible for the Foster Care Grant (FCG) [11]. The purpose of the FCG is to support families in meeting the needs of children placed in their care. Sibanda explains that prevention and early intervention services occur at the beginning of the child protection process [3]. The process can then proceed to the statutory level, which involves the removal and placement of a child in alternative care. The role of a social worker begins with investigations into and an assessment of the child's need for care and protection, and writing a report. Subsequently, the social work supervisor's role is to ensure the quality of that report, which is then submitted and presented at the Children's Court [3]. Social workers in the employment of the Department of Social Development (DSD) and child protection organisations are referred to as designated social workers according to the Children's Act 38 of 2005 (hereafter referred to as the "Act") [12]. Section 180 of the Act stipulates that a child is in foster care if they have been placed in the care of a person who is not their parent or guardian by a children's court. When the court has finalised a foster care placement, Section 159 of the Act stipulates that after a child has been placed in a foster care placement, a social service practitioner must visit a child in foster care to monitor and evaluate the placement and that social workers must submit a foster care supervision and progress report to the children's court every two years [12].

Besides social workers, foster parents also play an essential role in ensuring that the purposes of foster care are met. According to the DSD, the responsibilities include, but are not limited to, a foster parent ensuring that social assistance is used for the child's upbringing and in the child's best interests, and ensuring regular school attendance if the child is of school-going age [13]. Aligned to the Africentric view, foster parents further have a responsibility to "ensure that where the child is from a different cultural, linguistic or religious background, the child is assisted to maintain links with his or her culture, language or religion" [13].

Child fostering is documented throughout the sub-Saharan African region, with varying practices and reasons for fostering [14]. Within this child protection system, social workers play a central role in ensuring that the objectives of foster care are achieved through ongoing assessment, supervision, and support of foster care placements. Their effective fulfilment of this role contributes significantly to promoting children's safety, stability and well-being throughout the placement.

Within the foster care system, multiple role players contribute to the well-being of the child, including social workers, social work supervisors, biological parents, schoolteachers, and foster parents. However, the focus of this paper is on foster parents, social workers, and social worker supervisors. Research indicates that child protection and foster care social workers often encounter challenges in fulfilling their roles effectively, largely due to high caseloads and increasing service demands [15]. These structural pressures can affect the extent to which social workers can provide consistent monitoring, guidance, and support to foster families. Role theory provides a useful framework for understanding the expectations placed upon individuals within the foster care system. Individuals generally occupy multiple social and professional roles simultaneously, with each role carrying distinct expectations and responsibilities [16]. Positive role fulfilment refers to the extent to which individuals enact behaviours that are aligned with the expectations associated with their roles. These roles influence not only individual behaviour but also self-concept and others' perceptions of an individual's conduct and responsibility [16]. Consequently, Role Theory assists in explaining how the fulfilment of these role expectations contributes to the effective functioning of the foster child's care circle and ultimately to children's well-being.

From an Africentric perspective, the conceptualisation of roles within foster care can be understood within the broader framework of relationality and collective responsibility. Africentric thought emphasises interconnectedness, communal caregiving, and the philosophy of Ubuntu, which recognises that the well-being of an individual is deeply embedded within the well-being of the community [4]. Luhailima and Mulovhedzi further describe Ubuntu as an indigenous African philosophy that promotes dignity, compassion and interconnectedness in relationships between individuals and their communities [17]. Within this worldview, the child is not regarded as belonging solely to a nuclear household but to a wider kinship network and community structure. Ince similarly argues that an Afrocentric perspective views child-rearing as a collective responsibility, with extended family and community relationships playing a central role in children's care, identity formation, and well-being [18]. Consequently, the roles of social workers, supervisors, and foster parents extend beyond procedural responsibilities to include relational engagement with extended family members and the community. This perspective highlights the importance of collaborative caregiving and culturally responsive practice, where the care circle surrounding the child collectively contributes to the child's protection, development, and socialisation.

The key participants in the foster child's life are expected to fulfil clearly defined roles that contribute to the child's well-being. Although individual practitioners may differ in their personalities, experiences, and working styles, the expectations associated with their roles remain broadly consistent [16]. Role expectations refer to the shared understanding of the behaviours, responsibilities, and standards that individuals occupying a particular role are expected to demonstrate. These expectations provide a basis for evaluating whether role players are fulfilling their responsibilities effectively. In matters concerning children, social workers are expected to apply the best interest of the child principle. This means, among other things, considering the child's need to be raised in a nurturing family environment [19]. This nurturing family context is crucial, as children may have been displaced, moved from their homes, their friends, their routines, and into foster care [20]. Children should not suffer further in foster care. According to the Guidelines for the Effective Management of Foster Care in South Africa, foster care has the assessment phase, placement phase, and supervision and support phase [21]. Consequently, the roles performed by social workers change across these phases, while remaining guided by the best interest of the child throughout the foster care process.

The study was directed by Africentric theory [22] and Role and Identity theory [23] to interpret participants' views. Africentricity is a paradigm that describes "the need to

centre Africa and people of African descent in any analysis and understanding of the lives of Black people" [24]. The two terms "Afrocentrism" and "Africentrism" will be used interchangeably, as some authors refer to "Afrocentrism". Chawane explains that Afrocentricity emerged as an intellectual response to Eurocentric scholarship by deliberately positioning African people, their histories, cultures, and knowledge systems at the centre of analysis [25]. Africentrism is used in this study "in contradistinction to the term Eurocentrism that takes centre stage when attention is directed to any discussion about the psycho-cultural perspective of the people of European descent" [22]. The core Afrocentric proposition of Asante is that Africans should know that there is nothing wrong with them and that they should reject any negativity about Africa [26]. Even though the knowledge base of social work has been largely Eurocentric or dominated by Anglo-American values, which were believed to be universally applicable [27,28]. Africans are not inferior [26]. Mathebane and Sekudu add that whilst Eurocentric values may be important and worthy, Africentrism also has a place in social work practice and social work research [27]. Africentrism thus challenges Eurocentrism, which has historically marginalised and inferiorised African worldviews through the brutality of epistemic colonisation [29]. Similarly, Chawane argues that Afrocentricity is not merely a critique of Eurocentrism, but a deliberate repositioning of African people as producers of knowledge rather than objects of research [25].

Foster care supervision and monitoring in Southern Africa should be appropriate for Africans and utilise knowledge and philosophies that cohere with the African context. Recent Afrocentric scholarship similarly argues that professional interventions with African families should be grounded in African worldviews, indigenous knowledge systems and culturally relevant approaches rather than relying exclusively on imported Western frameworks [30]. For this reason, we underscore that the Africentrism we discuss is not about being in Africa but about a worldview based on African values and philosophies. The reclaiming of these knowledges is critical, as the colonial destruction and denigration of cultures, histories and knowledge systems is still evident [29]. According to Asante, the capturing and enslavement of Africans has resulted in epistemes that undermine African ideas. Unfortunately, Africans have internalised this worldview of white supremacy and black inferiority [26]. Asante suggests that Afrocentrism is crucial for any behaviour or activity involving Africans [26]. This paper thus seeks to incorporate the views of African participants in the supervision and monitoring of foster care in an African context. Africentrism positions Africans as active participants and agents in and of their own narratives. Africentrism provides a culturally grounded framework for understanding issues of African children in the child protection system and for developing culturally appropriate and responsive interventions. This perspective is consistent with Ince's argument that Afrocentric approaches to child and family welfare recognise children's development and well-being as being inseparable from their relationships with family, community, and culture [18]. The social work field has been subjugated by the hegemony of Western methods, paradigms, and values [27,29,31]. Thus, it is stated that the "Africentric paradigm in social work is an important professional development towards rendering social work practice more culturally competent" [24]. A foster child's care circle is important in their well-being, as individuals come to mature through interactions with others [22].

Role theory and identity theory were also used as theoretical frameworks [23]. Setlalentoa et al. state that role theory illustrates the importance of role performance and how it enhances the balance of a system [32]. When roles are not performed as expected, challenges are more likely to arise and put systems out of equilibrium. It is perhaps important to start by indicating that "an identity is the set of meanings that define individuals as occupants of roles in society, members of groups or social categories, or unique persons

with characteristics that identify them” [23]. For instance, individuals apply meanings to themselves when they are social workers, such as professional, empathetic or foster parent, such as caring and cooperative [23].

In alignment with role theory, identity theory argues that people’s identities are formed around role identities and social roles. The self can identify with various roles and act in accordance with those roles. However, Paterson-Young and Maher noted that in some instances, role ambiguity may lead to confusion, with foster parents playing roles of professionals and carers in England [33]. Roles provide structure, organisation, and meaning to selves and to situations [23]. Within the foster care system, foster parents play the caregiving role, providing protection and emotional support, whilst social workers play professional roles which include assessments, supervision and monitoring. In this way, all participants in the child’s care system have specifically defined roles, for instance, foster parents being required to have close working relationships with biological parents and social workers [33].

Role theory is relevant and appropriate in explaining whether responsibilities and rights associated with foster parents and social workers are performed to meet the best interests of children. The integration of role theory and identity theory with an Africentric worldview thus highlights how roles in the foster care system are not only institutionally defined but also shaped by culturally embedded values of communal care, collective child-rearing and shared responsibility. It is on this basis that social workers need to provide supervision and monitoring services for the foster care placement to assess whether the foster parents fulfil their assigned roles in advancing the best interests of their foster children. The study was guided by the following main research question.

- What do social workers regard as positive role fulfilment amongst role players in the foster child’s care circle that facilitates the child’s well-being?

The sub-questions that guided the study are as follows:

- What are the roles and responsibilities of social workers in supervising and monitoring foster care placements?
- What are the roles and responsibilities of foster parents in caring for and nurturing the children placed in their care?
- What are the roles of supervisors in ensuring that social workers deliver on their mandate of supervising and monitoring foster care placements?

Although the concept of role fulfilment is central to this study, the authors distinguish positive role fulfilment from the routine performance of assigned duties or compliance with statutory obligations. Role fulfilment, in its broadest sense, refers to carrying out the responsibilities associated with a particular social or professional position. However, positive role fulfilment extends beyond simply completing prescribed tasks. Within the context of foster care, it refers to the manner in which foster parents, social workers, and social work supervisors play their roles through commitment, responsiveness, collaboration, and genuine concern for foster children’s well-being. It therefore encompasses not only what role players do, but also how and why they perform their roles in ways that promote positive outcomes for foster children.

This conceptualisation is informed by Role Theory, Identity Theory, and Africentrism. Role Theory explains the expectations associated with different roles within the foster child’s care circle, while Identity Theory suggests that these expectations are more consistently performed when they become part of an individual’s professional or caregiving identity [23]. From an Africentrism perspective, positive role fulfilment is further understood as a relational and communal process rooted in Ubuntu, where caring for children is viewed as a shared responsibility rather than an individual obligation [22,24]. In this

study, positive role fulfilment is therefore understood as the intentional and meaningful performance of roles in ways that strengthen relationships, support collaborative practice, and ultimately promote the holistic well-being, belonging, and long-term development of foster children.

2. Materials and Methods

A qualitative approach was employed to explore the meanings and understandings that study participants had about the positive role fulfilment among role players within the foster child's care circle in supporting well-being. Using an Africentric philosophical perspective, the ontological position of the researchers leaned towards social constructivism [34], as they believed that reality is known through socially constructed meanings and human minds. The Africentric perspective furthermore centres a more relational and communal rather than individualist philosophical position in its approach. Epistemologically, an interpretivist approach was used, as this focuses on the importance of people's experiences, perspectives, and the meaning that they make of these [34,35]. The researchers sought to understand participants' perspectives on what they regard as positive role fulfilment among role players within the foster child's care circle in supporting well-being arising from their experiences of processes of foster care supervision and monitoring. The researchers were interested in gathering data from social workers with experience in foster care supervision and monitoring, and thus used a phenomenological research design.

A literature review was conducted to identify and synthesise the existing body of knowledge on foster care supervision and monitoring. The literature review further informed the development of the theoretical framework, comprising Role Theory, Identity Theory, and the Africentric perspective, and guided the development of the semi-structured interview schedule. The study included twelve participants, comprising ten foster care social workers and two social work supervisors. Six social workers participated in one focus group discussion, while four social workers and the two social work supervisors participated in individual semi-structured interviews. The focus group discussion and individual interviews involved different participants. In addition, two foster care policy developers were consulted as key stakeholders to provide contextual insight into the legislative and policy environment within which foster care services are rendered. Their contributions were not analysed as participant data in this article.

As it was impractical to study the entire population, purposive sampling was used to recruit participants with the necessary characteristics needed for the study. Inclusion criteria were that they had to be social workers or social work supervisors in the employ of DSD who had worked in foster care services for over 2 years. The researcher wrote a letter to the DSD Head of Department requesting permission to conduct the research study in the respective DSD service points. After the approval was granted, the advert for the study and the participant information sheets were provided to the potential participants for their consideration.

The researcher conducted one-on-one face-to-face interviews with four foster care social workers and two social work supervisors in their respective offices at the service points, using a semi-structured interview schedule to guide the interviews. The study's theoretical framework informed the semi-structured interview schedule. Questions were developed to explore participants' understandings of the roles and responsibilities of foster parents, social workers, and social work supervisors, while remaining sufficiently open to allow participants to describe their own experiences and perspectives. This method enabled the researcher to respond to comments as they arose and probe more deeply when needed for clarity [36]. She also conducted a focus group discussion (FGD) with six foster care social workers from one of the service points. Tisdell et al. describes a focus group

as an interview with a group of people who are knowledgeable on a specific topic [36]. The interviews and focus group discussions were audio recorded and later transcribed verbatim for data analysis.

Data were thematically analysed using the six phases of reflexive thematic analysis, which include a focus on the researcher's own positionality throughout the analysis process [37]. The phases followed were dataset familiarisation, data coding, initial theme generation, theme development and review, theme refining, defining and naming, and writing up. Dataset familiarisation involved thoroughly reading through transcripts to really understand the content from participants. The researcher immersed herself in the dataset to gain an intimate knowledge and understanding of it. She then allocated codes to segments of the data that seemed relevant, significant, and meaningful to the study objectives. During the coding process, she grouped parts of the data according to their meaning and relevance. Following this, the researcher clustered codes of similar ideas into initial themes, which arose from the broader shared meanings across the data. In the fourth phase, initial themes from the previous phase were assessed to determine how they aligned with the study objectives and accurately captured meanings. The themes were then further developed and reviewed, removing some that lacked sufficient support from the overall dataset. Theme refining, defining, and naming meant that the researcher examined and reflected on each theme to ensure that it accurately represented and was grounded in the relevant core idea. Themes were named to capture their essence. The last phase was the writing up, as evidenced in this paper. The data analysis was primarily inductive in line with the interpretivist view, whereby the themes were generated from the participants' contributions [38]. However, there was a lesser deductive element that was also incorporated to explore how themes identified in the literature review and the theoretical framework were evident in the data, or how these may have contrasted with the data. Role Theory, Identity Theory, and the Africentric perspective further informed the interpretation of the themes by providing a theoretical lens through which participants' understandings of positive role fulfilment were interpreted and discussed.

The study population comprised ten foster care social workers and two social work supervisors from the Ngaka Modiri Molema District (NMMD) of the North West Province, South Africa. In addition, two foster care policy developers were purposively consulted as key stakeholders to provide contextual insight into the legislative and policy environment governing foster care services. Their views were not analysed as part of the empirical findings presented in this article.

Trustworthiness was ensured through a set of criteria that included transferability, credibility, dependability and confirmability. Multiple strategies were employed to enhance each criterion. The participation of multiple researchers in this study provided investigator triangulation, thereby ensuring the trustworthiness of the study [39]. Two researchers with extensive research experience guided the primary researcher throughout the study.

Dependability in qualitative research may be compromised as human participants' behaviour may change; therefore, emphasis is placed on ensuring that the research process is logical, well-documented, and can be followed by other researchers [38]. For this study, the strategy of maintaining an audit trail was used to enhance the dependability of collected data [39]. The researchers documented how data were collected, analysed, and how decisions were made throughout the process. Audio recording the interviews was another strategy used to enhance credibility by ensuring that no data was lost during data collection. Audio files were repeatedly played during the transcription process to ensure accurate capture of participants' responses, thereby enhancing credibility. Further, the strategy of using verbatim quotations from participants has been included in the findings

to demonstrate the study's credibility. This ensured that the presented findings reflected the participants' views.

Transferability speaks to how the results of a study can be transferred to another situation [38]. The strategy of providing a thick description was used to enhance transferability. The researchers have provided a thick description of how the study was conducted, including the study participants, permissions, purposive sampling, data collection, analysis, and study findings, to enable readers to compare the results with their own situations.

Confirmability was enhanced through the audit trail and inclusion of participants' verbatim quotations in the results. The involvement of multiple researchers throughout the study ensured that decisions were discussed collectively, thereby reducing the influence of individual researcher bias. The audit trail further provided a transparent record of how the results were generated, while verbatim quotations demonstrated that the results were grounded in participants' accounts rather than the researchers' assumptions. According to Creswell and Poth, confirmability speaks to the ability of other researchers to use this study as a foundation for future research [34].

Ethical approval was sought before the commencement of data collection. It was granted by the research ethics committee of the University of Pretoria, South Africa, on 28 November 2024. The ethics approval reference number is HUM006/0724. Further, the DSD in the North-West Province granted permission, in the form of a signed letter from its research department, to conduct the study. The data collection instruments were piloted to ensure that they collected the relevant data. Data collected from the pilot study were not included in the final study. Participants in the pilot study were from the same service point and were not included in the final study. Other ethical considerations were adhered to, including confidentiality and anonymity, informed consent, ethics of decoloniality, voluntary participation, beneficence and non-maleficence, publication of the findings, and the competence and positionality of the researchers.

3. Results

3.1. Demographic Details of Participants

The participants' biographical profiles were compiled using information on their gender, racial background, and years of experience in foster care supervision and monitoring. All participants had over 2 years of experience in foster care services. The demographic data showed that foster care supervision and monitoring are predominantly carried out by women. Of the 12 participants, 10 identified as female and only 2 as male. This aligns with Makhanya's observation that social work remains a female-dominated profession. All but one participant identified as Black, which corresponds with the demographic composition of the study's geographical area [40]. According to COGTA, Africans made up 94.34% of the district's population in 2018, while Whites accounted for 3.38% [41]. The participants also possessed adequate experience in the foster care system, with each having more than two years of involvement in foster care supervision and monitoring, making them suitably qualified to contribute to the study.

3.2. Roles of Different Role Players in the Foster Care Placement

The main findings of the study are presented under three themes: roles of foster parents, roles of social workers, and roles of social work supervisors and their sub-themes. The presentation of the themes shall include quotations directly from participants.

3.2.1. Roles of Foster Parents

Foster parents have crucial roles to play in the foster care system and have responsibilities towards their foster children. From the study, it appeared that social workers

do not always indicate these roles to foster parents, whilst some presiding officers may do so at the time of the court proceedings. The findings are presented in the following sub-themes: active and present parenting, behavioural management and parental authority, and long-term financial planning for children placed in their care.

Active and Present Parenting

Participants indicated that foster parents are expected to know their foster children well and should be able to indicate to the social worker if there is something amiss about the child's development. They explained that caring for a foster child means ensuring they are reaching milestones as expected and bringing them up in a way that enables them to be independent when they exit the system. This can be achieved when foster parents serve as present, active parents in the children's lives. Participants expressed that overall, the role of active parenting should take precedence over other roles in relation to being a foster parent, such as focusing on the FCG "as a means of financial security". Participants described present foster parents as follows:

We are saying that if parents are active, when their foster children leave the system, they have high chances of success, whether they have matric or not. (Participant 12)

The foster parent here is an older person, if I may put it that way. It's an older person who understood you as a social worker to say she has been given this child, now they're in a foster care placement. She cares for the foster child as her child. Whatever happens in the family, affecting this child and this foster mother, will inform the social worker of all processes. The child performs well at school, which you will know as a social worker. (Participant 1)

Discipline and Parental Authority

Another role that participants reported foster parents should play is that of a disciplinarian, modifying behaviour. Participants indicated that foster children may display difficult behaviour, and the foster parent should deal with these problems appropriately themselves. It should not be that foster parents always report to social workers with the expectation that they will discipline foster children. One participant stated that some foster parents just want the 'good side' of fostering and want to distance themselves from the foster children when children start to display problematic or difficult behaviour.

My focus is mainly on the issue of behaviour. I would look into the file and start to realise that now, this is an adolescent in the care of an older person. Now the behaviour will start to change; there is a lot of teenage energy, and the older person does not have that energy. Now I want to come up with a strategy to help the foster parent tame her. (Participant 1)

So, the other thing, just to take it from the top, is that the whole point sometimes is that as social workers, we don't understand that foster care is not about... it is about caring for the child. Whether this child is having behavioural problems, whether this child is not attending school and all of that. It is also about a child finding a suitable parent to help modify their behaviour. (Participant 4)

Parents should use their parenting skills to discipline their foster children. Another participant added that good parenting skills are also valuable skills in foster parenting. She remembered how a foster parent was intentional about teaching her foster child good manners.

Yeah, the one little boy, the second day when I got there, I took a food parcel, and he started talking to me, and I said to the foster parent, "What is he saying?"

Then she says no he's asking me for R1.00. And then she said to me but that's not good manners, I will teach him. So, it's a hands-on foster parent as well. You know who has parenting skills. (Participant 9)

Parents should not regard it as necessary to report every insignificant or minor behavioural problem or difficulty to social workers, as if they expect 'perfect' behaviour from foster children. They need to understand that they have a role to play in raising the child and providing parental guidance and discipline. One participant said;

They question the behaviour of the child, erm, they make as if that child is something that they were not expecting. . . to modify the behaviour. It's that they end up making the children as if they are so special. They do not treat them like, in terms of parental responsibilities, that this is my child; they've been placed under my care. (Participant 10)

Long-Term Financial Planning

Participants indicated that foster parents played a role in ensuring that the foster child's future is considered throughout the placement. A foster parent should not only focus on daily needs but also remember that the child will leave the foster care system at some point. This could be when they turn eighteen and do not proceed to tertiary education, or when the placement will lapse at twenty-one if they pursue further education. The foster care placement is accompanied by a monthly FCG payable to the foster parent to care for the child. Some social workers expect parents to use the grant wisely, whilst also considering the future.

And we advise the foster parents to save the grant. We say maybe after three months, come with the post-bank book to show me, or when you have receipts to show the book. . . that she is saving. . . You sit with the foster parent, trying to show her the importance of the savings because, coming to the issue of savings, those who do not save are the first ones to come and ask for financial assistance, as compared to those who save. (Participant 10)

Although we don't talk about it, sometimes I insist that a client save money. We had one incident like that, but most of the time it is for the purpose of. . . good faith. (Participant 3)

Not all social workers believe that monitoring the grant should be one of their roles. The participant found that this is an administrative role that distracts social workers from their main functions.

We should also have a look at, I don't want to say it because they always say it, and I tell them it's not about this. But there must be some way of just monitoring the expenditure of the foster care grant. Uhm, they think extension is about the grant. So, I tell them it's not about the grant, it's about the child. But despite that, we must still monitor the grant, that's only one part ne. (Participant 2)

Some participants further observed that expectations of saving money from the grant impacted foster parents' attendance of supervision sessions, as they were afraid of social workers' negative judgement of them.

So, you find that there is somewhere where they breach and no longer save. That then stops them from coming to report whatever progress there is because they are scared that they will be criticised for the savings booklet. (Participant 8)

3.2.2. Roles of Social Workers

The roles of social workers in the foster care space, as indicated by participants, are reported in the following sub-themes.

Guidance and Administrative Support

Participants reported that social workers have a role in informing foster parents and children about foster care placement processes. They should guide them to ascertain that the purpose of foster care is always reached. One social worker said:

After going to court for the initial placement, we explain to them [foster parents] that they should attend supervision quarterly. (Participant 10)

Social workers are mandated to play the role of supervisor in foster care placements. They should monitor whether the placements are progressing well or not. This also means providing support to foster parents. One participant even highlighted the importance of educating social work students on foster care services during their practicum.

The processes of screening, after screening, you do Section 155 reports that a child needs protection and care. After that, there is monitoring every two years, you see. (Participant 9)

Now, when I get students to supervise, I ensure that I teach them about foster care. When I don't get students, I take it upon myself to request students. I don't want them to get lost as I did. I teach them from intake, as well as proper record-keeping. You might find that you work and do not record. At the end, you're asked for proof, and you do not have it because you did not record it. (Participant 11)

Supervision services are not optional but regulated. It is also the social worker's role to assist foster families and foster children to adjust to foster placement by rendering appropriate support services. Participants further stated the following regarding the role of social workers.

Care and support. Is this child being taken care of? Giving the foster child love. Yes, money is needed, but it is just another aspect. (Participant 2)

Remember, after placing, you have to monitor that everything is still fine. I think after roughly 2 years, you can extend it based on whether the placement is fine. So, I think a minimum of 2 years, as it is without any issues, the parent being able to put the responsibility of being a parent to the child, without any incidents that show that she is neglecting those children or giving them secondary abuse. (Participant 11)

Conducting School Visits to Monitor the Academic Progress

Social workers reported that they also play a role in ensuring that the child's schooling is going well. They stated that children of school-going age should have the necessary school supplies for regular school attendance. Participants stated that they primarily fulfil this role by conducting school visits, where they can interact with the children in the absence of their parents. Participants said:

Sometimes we go to school to fill in those school reports, check the attendance of the child; if they have been attending properly, and the child's performance, are they performing well and passing. (Participant 9)

It is expected that during your home visit, for supervision, the person must give you any information regarding the foster child, including school performance and behaviour, and whatever else. (Participant 5)

You have to go to schools and whatever else. Then you check with other people who are the child's support system". (Participant 2)

I also check the school uniform. (Participant 10)

Collaborative Future Planning for Children

With support from social workers, foster parents do not feel alone. Participants reported that they provide crucial information to foster parents that assists them in decision-making about their placements and the future of their foster children. For instance, participants reported on permanency and education that:

One other thing again, a new approach for now. When we do supervision, foster care supervision, what we normally do now, we throw in, in adoption, they talk about. . . what are these things. . . options counselling. Whereby we present the other options for the parent, it's either. . . we encourage that person to adopt the child. So that they have permanency in terms of their stability of living. (Participant 6)

I took on this case in 2016. I am not sure, I think the child was in primary school. She managed to register at a tertiary institution and studied engineering. The following year, we said, because they passed well, let us try to apply for you to NSFAS. Erm, I wrote a motivation. They got the bursary. (Participant 7)

Monitor the FCG

Social workers expressed that it is their role to monitor how the grant is used. They reported that they regularly asked foster parents to produce proof of saving some part of the grant or show what they had used the grant for.

And we advise the foster parents to save the grant. We say, maybe after three months, come with the post-bank book to show me or when you have receipts to show the book. (Participant 1)

We look at the issue of the savings for the child. The child will be completing school; we'll be checking whether the finances are going well and whether there is a plan for. . . maybe they are saving for the child. That's why we monitor the issue of parents saving a certain amount. At least if they are 5 years old and you save for them, when they turn 18, it will be a lot of money. (Participant 8)

As alluded to earlier, the role of social workers in the supervision and monitoring of foster care need not be a daunting task of solely focusing on the use of the FCG but on the overall well-being and care of the child.

3.2.3. Roles of Social Work Supervisors

Social work supervisors reported that their roles are to support social workers in the foster care system. Social work supervisors, herein referred to as "supervisors", play an important role in the foster child's care circle as they ensure quality around the placement and ensure adherence and appropriate implementation of agency policies and procedures. Further, supervisors' roles are threefold: administrative, educational, and supportive. Supervisors play a role in ensuring adherence to policies and procedures in the agency.

Quality Assurance and Guidance

Supervisors stated that they allocated foster care files to social workers and provided guidance to them as to what to do, both in individual consultations and in group settings. They also ensured that reports submitted to the courts are of good quality and are in line with relevant legislation. Supervisors reported their roles in the foster care space as follows:

I do supervision of their reports, making sure all the documents are attached, ensuring corrections are done and signing off, and then they go to court. I monitor, and I'm also responsible for the whole childcare and protection program in the

service point. Which means that I also canalise reports. Often, they submit a report, and immediately, I can tell they haven't seen this child. (Participant 2)

We allocate files every month, we allocate files that are due to lapse, that are due to be reviewed, and CCHs (Children's Court Hearings). (Participant 5)

I allocate them as a supervisor & give them a time frame by which they should submit the report. Because we also work with targets. My role is to supervise the files & to guide social workers in terms of the Act, to ensure that they comply with the Act. (Participant 2)

Strengthening Quality Interventions

Supervisors reported that their roles included consulting with social workers to ensure they provide effective supervision and monitoring services to clients. Effective supervision and monitoring services help them identify problematic placements and intervene accordingly. In addition, this role is about supervisors being able to identify low-quality interventions and rectify them. At times, social workers on the ground may come across cases that may make them forget what foster care is mainly about, and supervisors are there to remind them. This speaks to the supervisors' educational role.

We are trying our best, but really. Now they, they don't understand that foster care supervision is not about doing the reports so that the people can receive the grant. It is about monitoring the placement of this specific child, and only when you do that can you pick up what the nature of the child is. And how it changes over time as they grow older. And then you can also pick up foster parents not doing what they should be doing. (Participant 3)

My role is to supervise the files & to guide social workers in terms of the Act, to ensure that they comply with the Act. (Participant 5)

As seen from the above quotations, supervisors of social workers rendering foster care services are responsible for a substantial amount of work. Supervisors have work to do in all phases of foster care, as seen below:

I take it is important as a social worker to have a supervisor, and the supervisor should take you on board as to what is expected of you. Prepare the ground for you. (Participant 8)

You go to one office, you find that before or during case management, there is a discussion between the supervisor and social worker, and the supervisor will support the social worker in terms of crafting that; this was the problem statement, these were your interventions, this is what transpired, maybe in one of the discussions with the family. Dig deeper into this. (Participant 12)

4. Discussion

The foster care system requires a team of role players, which includes the foster parent, social worker, and social work supervisor. These key role players must be familiar with the roles that they are expected to play so that there is no confusion when rendering services. The findings provide important insights into how participants understood positive role fulfilment among the key stakeholders within the foster child's care circle. Rather than merely describing the responsibilities of different role players, participants emphasised how these responsibilities should be carried out to promote children's well-being. The discussion interprets the findings by drawing on concepts from Role Theory, Identity Theory and Africentric perspectives, where they best explain participants' accounts.

Foster parents have “varying lifestyles, skills, capacities, and personalities” [42], yet they should all play similar roles in ensuring that the purpose of foster care is met. Despite these individual differences, participants consistently described positive foster parenting in terms of how foster parents fulfilled their caregiving responsibilities. Their accounts suggest that occupying the position of a foster parent meant actively responding to children’s educational, emotional, developmental, and social needs. This finding can be understood through the role expectations associated with foster parenting. Burke and Stets explain that every social role carries shared expectations regarding appropriate behaviour [23]. Participants’ descriptions reflected these expectations by emphasising that effective foster parenting requires more than occupying the position of a foster parent. Instead, they associated positive foster parenting with consistently responding to children’s needs through care, guidance, and active involvement. Positive role fulfilment, therefore, extended beyond assuming the title of foster parent to consistently fulfilling the responsibilities associated with that role. In this regard, participants viewed foster parenting as an active and relational role as opposed to a merely statutory function.

Participants also consistently valued foster parents who regarded caring for foster children as an enduring responsibility rather than temporary care. Burke and Stets further explain that individuals are more likely to perform role-related behaviours consistently when they regard a role as part of who they are, rather than simply a set of responsibilities [23]. Although participants did not describe this in theoretical terms, their accounts suggest that they valued foster parents who embraced the caregiving role as an ongoing commitment to children’s well-being. Their descriptions of care, belonging, guidance, and supportive family relationships also resonate with Nwoye’s understanding that personhood is realised through relationships with others and with others [22], and Schiele’s view that caring is grounded in interconnectedness and collective responsibility [24]. Instead of reflecting statutory compliance alone, participants’ accounts suggest that they understood foster parenting as nurturing children within relationships characterised by care, belonging, and mutual responsibility. These findings are consistent with both the statutory responsibilities and broader caregiving expectations associated with the foster parenting role. Foster parents have a responsibility to provide for the day-to-day needs of a foster child, including ensuring that a child attends school regularly if they are of school-going age [13] and, in the event of kinship, to ensure that children have an opportunity to uphold their cultural and spiritual identity [43]. Sibanda further argues that children have a right to stay with the family and community of origin, as this assists in ensuring that they are not dislocated from their own roots [44]. Spontaneous child fostering has historically occurred in many African contexts due to expectations that children should be reared within kinship networks [14]. Foster parents have a distinct and important role that integrates family and agency responsibility; they are a link between the two and have a responsibility to invest in their foster children’s future [45]. Communalism and community are central to Africentrism [27]. The foster parent liaises with professionals to ensure the foster child’s well-being is enhanced, because child care is not an individual task but a joint venture as “a child belongs to all family members and extended family” [43]. The foster parent has a responsibility to cooperate with a designated social worker towards the reunification of the child with his or her biological parents or family members [13]. Social workers expect to be kept informed of the placement’s happenings so that they can intervene timeously. When children display uncontrollable behaviour, it seems that social workers prefer that parents first try to address the behaviour before informing the social worker. Perhaps this is due to foster parents having the primary role to “guide the behaviour of the child in a humane manner” without punishing or humiliating the child [13]. In addition, Choiri states that foster parents should also provide emotional support to their foster children [46].

Collectively, these findings suggest that participants understood positive foster parenting as extending beyond the fulfilment of statutory responsibilities. Positive role fulfilment was associated with foster parents who actively embraced their caregiving role, demonstrated commitment to children's holistic well-being, and cultivated relationships characterised by care, belonging, and mutual respect. Participants consistently described effective foster parenting not only in terms of meeting children's physical and developmental needs, but also through fulfilling the shared expectations associated with the foster parenting role, embracing the caregiving role as an ongoing responsibility, and nurturing relationships that reflected interconnectedness and collective responsibility for children's well-being [22–24]. These findings reinforce the importance of supporting foster parents to fulfil both their statutory responsibilities and the relational dimensions of foster parenting within the foster child's care circle. From the perspectives of the participating social workers and supervisors, foster parents contribute not only to meeting children's immediate needs but also to creating stable, nurturing family environments that are perceived to promote children's long-term well-being and development.

In considering the child's future, foster parents have been instructed by social workers to save some of the monthly FCG they receive for the future needs of the child. This is because foster parents have a responsibility to ensure that any social assistance received is utilised towards the child's upbringing and in their best interest [13]. Participants appeared to be critical of foster parents who failed to save part of the grant. However, these expectations should be understood within the broader South African context of poverty, inequality, and socio-economic vulnerability, which affect many households, including those participating in the foster care system [47,48]. Social workers' concerns about saving the grant may therefore reflect their commitment to safeguarding children's future well-being rather than simply monitoring financial compliance. From the perspective adopted in this study, these findings may also be interpreted through an Africentric lens, which encourages consideration of how household resources are often understood within relationships of shared family responsibility. Emovon et al., argue that African family life is characterised by shared responsibility, where available resources often support the household collectively while remaining directed towards promoting children's well-being [49].

Social workers are involved in the entire statutory process related to foster care, and their role in foster care is indispensable [50,51]. Their supervision and monitoring responsibilities continue throughout the placement until the child exits the foster care system [12]. Participants consistently described social workers as central figures in the foster child's care circle, whose responsibilities extended beyond completing statutory procedures. They highlighted the importance of social workers providing ongoing guidance, support, and monitoring throughout the child's placement. This suggests that participants understood positive role fulfilment not only in terms of completing legislated responsibilities, but also in terms of the quality and continuity of professional support provided to foster children and foster families. Whilst the court may order supervision and reunification services, participants indicated that social workers often struggle to provide these services because of staff shortages and high caseloads, which limit regular home visits and effective foster care supervision [44].

Participants showed an understanding of what they expected social workers to do throughout foster care placements. Burke and Stets explain that every professional role carries shared expectations regarding appropriate behaviour and performance [23]. Participants' descriptions reflected these expectations by emphasising that social workers should provide continuous supervision, guidance, reunification support and monitoring throughout the placement. At the same time, they recognised that organisational realities,

including staff shortages and excessive caseloads, may constrain social workers' ability to fulfil these expectations consistently. These findings therefore suggest that positive role fulfilment depends not only on understanding one's professional responsibilities but also on having organisational capacity to carry them out effectively.

Sibanda and Lombard have also noted that the South African government recognises this critical role of social workers in foster care [52]. Contrary to the Democratic Republic of Congo, where Foussiakda and Kasherwa noted that there is no support from the government to foster carers [53]. Nkosi adds that South African social workers further provide multiple reports to the court based on the child's circumstances [50]. Such a report could include the child's assessment, the interventions that have taken place, and the fact that the foster child should have a permanency plan. For instance, the Act states that "a designated social worker may be required to provide a report entailing an assessment of the child's best interest and reunification before the provincial head of social development may issue a notice of discharge of a child" [12]. Reunification should be facilitated by the social worker whilst also engaging with the family of the child, as family engagement is at the centre of family reunification [4].

Participants also appeared to value social workers who regarded supporting foster children and their families as more than an administrative responsibility. Their accounts suggest that they valued practitioners who demonstrated commitment to children's well-being, facilitated family relationships, and remained actively involved throughout the foster care placement. Burke and Stets explain that people are more likely to perform role-related behaviours consistently when they regard a professional role as part of who they are, rather than merely as a set of prescribed duties [23]. Although participants did not express this in theoretical language, their descriptions suggest that they valued social workers who embrace child protection as an ongoing professional commitment. Similarly, participants emphasised maintaining relationships with foster families, supporting reunification where appropriate and monitoring children's well-being. These descriptions are consistent with Nwoye's understanding that well-being is realised through relationships with others [22] and Schiele's view that caring is grounded in interconnectedness and collective responsibility [24]. Instead of functioning solely as statutory officials, participants' accounts suggest that they viewed social workers as facilitators of collaborative care within the foster child's care circle.

Social workers added that they monitor the FCG, which Hendricks found supplements to the family's resources to help in the upbringing of children [45]. This corresponds with Tladi and Sibanda who found that indeed the grant is beneficial to the children's well-being [54]. Whilst this role is not legislated, social workers tend to monitor the grant for the benefit of foster children. Participants emphasised the importance of maintaining relationships with foster families, supporting reunification where appropriate, and monitoring children's well-being throughout the placement. These descriptions suggest that participants viewed effective social work practice as a collaborative rather than an individual responsibility. This interpretation is consistent with Africentric perspectives that understand child well-being as a shared responsibility, sustained through ongoing relationships among children, families, communities and professionals [22,24]. Consequently, participants understood social workers not merely as statutory officials, but as facilitators of collaborative care within the foster child's care circle.

Overall, participants viewed positive role fulfilment among social workers as requiring more than the competent fulfilment of statutory responsibilities. They valued social workers who remained actively involved throughout the foster care placement by providing consistent supervision, facilitating reunification where appropriate, coordinating support, and responding to children's changing needs. These findings suggest that the effectiveness

of foster care is perceived by participants to depend not only on statutory intervention but also on social workers' sustained professional engagement with children, foster families, and other members of the foster child's care circle.

According to the Social Work Supervision Framework, among other things, social work supervisors should ensure social workers' competence and safeguard clients by protecting their interests [55]. This includes supervision of case notes, canalising of social work reports for opening and finalisation of the Children's court inquiry (Section 150 reports), extension of placement reports (Section 159 and Section 186 reports), variation of placement reports (Section 173 reports), transfer of placement reports (Section 174 reports), and discharge of placement reports (Section 175 reports). Supervisors have a role in verifying the accuracy of the reports' contents, as they must sign them. Their role includes ensuring that clients are protected from harm and empowering social workers to respect clients' rights [55].

The supervision framework highlights three functions of the social work supervisor: educational, administrative, and supportive [55]. Bara explains that the word "supervise" is a combination of two Latin words translating to "above", "over", and "to look", "see" [56]. While this definition captures the oversight function of supervision, participants in this study described supervision as extending beyond monitoring compliance with statutory responsibilities. They viewed social work supervisors as experienced practitioners who provide guidance, mentorship and professional support to social workers throughout the foster care process. This finding reflects Role Theory, which suggests that organisational roles are accompanied by clearly defined responsibilities and expectations [23]. Participants consistently associated positive role fulfilment among supervisors with providing direction, supporting decision-making and ensuring accountability within foster care practice. Their accounts therefore suggest that supervision is not limited to administrative oversight but also encompasses enabling social workers to perform their professional roles effectively.

Participants described supervision as extending beyond administrative oversight. They valued supervisors who provided guidance, shared their experience, supported decision-making, and remained available to social workers throughout challenging cases. Bara explains that supervision involves "looking over" practice; however, participants' descriptions suggest that they associated effective supervision with much more than oversight [56]. Their accounts are consistent with Nwoye's view that people develop through relationships with others and with the Ubuntu principle that knowledge, responsibility, and support are shared within a community rather than exercised through authority only [22]. These perspectives help explain why participants viewed supervision as a collaborative process that strengthens professional practice, ethical decision-making, and ultimately the quality of services provided to foster children and their families. It is essential to recognise that effective social work supervision contributes not only to the quality of services provided to children and families, but also to the professional development of social workers [57]. Participants described supervisors as individuals who guide practice, share experience and provide support when complex decisions need to be made. These responsibilities extend beyond administrative oversight to strengthening professional judgement and ethical decision-making. The Social Work Supervision Framework similarly identifies consultation, mentoring and professional support as important components of effective supervision [55]. Participants' descriptions therefore suggest that supervision is most effective when it creates opportunities for learning, reflection and shared problem-solving, enabling social workers to render services that remain responsive to the needs and best interests of foster children. For instance, supervisors play a critical role in safeguarding the professionalism and ethical conduct of social workers by ensuring that their practice remains aligned with statutory and professional standards. This includes monitoring and preventing the misuse of professional authority. Actions such as the removal of children

without a court order and failing to report it constitute a misuse of power and are regarded as both unprofessional and improper conduct [58].

Participants' accounts suggest that positive role fulfilment among social work supervisors extends beyond administrative oversight to creating the conditions that enable good social work practice. They valued supervisors who guided professional decision-making, promoted ethical practice, supported continuous learning, and remained actively engaged in developing social workers throughout the foster care process. Effective supervision was therefore understood by participants as strengthening not only the competence of individual practitioners but also the collective capacity of the foster child's care circle to support children's well-being. In this way, supervision contributes to a shared purpose of ensuring that foster care services remain responsive to the best interests of children and the families who care for them.

Role Theory provides a useful explanation for these findings by demonstrating that each role player occupies a distinct position accompanied by clearly defined expectations, while Identity Theory suggests that these expectations are more consistently performed when they become part of individuals' professional or caregiving identities [23]. Together, these theories indicate that positive role fulfilment depends not only on understanding one's responsibilities but also on embracing the values and purpose that give meaning to those responsibilities. From an Africentric perspective, this collective approach to caring for children reflects the principles of communalism and Ubuntu.

Mathebane and Sekudu simplify the meaning of Ubuntu as humanness [27], while Shokane and Masoga argue that although Ubuntu is an African word, it is actually a universal concept [31]. These principles encourage families and communities to assume shared responsibility for children's care when needed. This is reflected in the prevalence of kinship care in South Africa, where relatives commonly care for children within extended families [43]. Mshayisa et al. further note that kinship care enables children to remain connected to their families and culture of origin [43], while Estrada et al. also view the connection with the family of origin in Latin America as a good practise for the success of foster care [59]. Participants also recognised that positive role fulfilment is not always achieved in practice. Maphoto observed that clients are not always honest or cooperative with social workers [19], while Sibanda and Ngwabi reported instances where foster parents submitted falsified and fraudulent documents to social workers [1]. Furthermore, at times, foster parents provide incorrect information and may not even disclose new addresses when they relocate [19]. Such practices undermine trust, weaken collaborative relationships, and ultimately compromise children's well-being. These examples illustrate that when one role player fails to fulfil their responsibilities, the effectiveness of the entire foster child's care circle is diminished. This shows they are not fulfilling their roles as expected, which is detrimental to the child's well-being. Participants perceived positive role fulfilment amongst key role players in the foster child's care circle as facilitating the child's well-being and promoting healthy families. The South African government is committed to preserving and strengthening family life and prioritising children's matters [44]. This prioritisation is crucial as foster care is widespread globally, even documented throughout sub-Saharan Africa [14].

Overall, the findings suggest that positive role fulfilment is achieved when foster parents, social workers, and social work supervisors understand the expectations associated with their respective roles, consistently fulfil those responsibilities, and work collaboratively to promote children's well-being. Burke and Stets explain that Role Theory proposes that every social role carries shared expectations regarding appropriate behaviour, while Identity Theory suggests that these expectations are more likely to be enacted consistently when individuals internalise the role as part of their identity [23]. Together, these theories

provide a deeper understanding of why effective foster care depends not only on statutory expectations of compliance but also on the way in which key role players embrace and fulfil their responsibilities as part of their commitment and sense of identification with the role of being a foster parent.

Similarly, the Africentric perspective provides a theoretical lens for interpreting participants' emphasis on collaboration, mutual support, and shared responsibility. Rather than suggesting that participants explicitly drew on Africentric concepts, this perspective helps explain why they consistently associated positive role fulfilment with interconnected and interdependent relationships that promote children's well-being [22,27,31]. These theoretical perspectives, therefore, help explain why participants associated positive role fulfilment not merely with carrying out prescribed responsibilities, but with showing commitment, collaboration, mutual support, and shared responsibility for children's well-being. In doing so, the study shifts attention from what role players are expected to do towards how positive role fulfilment is understood and practised within the foster child's care circle. This study therefore demonstrates that strengthening foster care requires strengthening the collective relationships within the foster child's care circle that support children, families, and communities. Consistent with the Ubuntu philosophy, these relationships extend beyond individual caregiving and reflect an interdependent community where foster children's well-being is promoted through mutual support and shared responsibility [17].

4.1. Significance and Implications of the Study

This study contributes to understanding how social workers and supervisors perceive positive role fulfilment within the foster child's care circle by demonstrating that, from their perspectives, effective foster care depends not only on statutory compliance but also on how foster parents, social workers, and social work supervisors understand and enact their respective roles. The findings highlight the value of interpreting foster care practice through an Africentric perspective, which foregrounds relationships, collective responsibility, and children's cultural identity while remaining grounded in participants' experiences. The study has the following practical, policy and research implications.

4.1.1. Strengthening Role Clarity

The findings suggest that clearly defining and communicating the roles of foster parents, social workers, and social work supervisors may enhance collaboration and improve the quality of foster care supervision.

4.1.2. Promoting Relational Practice

Participants consistently emphasised supportive relationships, collaboration, and ongoing engagement with children and families. These findings suggest that effective foster care extends beyond completing statutory responsibilities to building trusting and supportive relationships.

4.1.3. Supporting Culturally Responsive Practice

The study indicates that supervision and monitoring practices may benefit from incorporating African cultural values, indigenous knowledge systems, and community strengths where appropriate, thereby supporting culturally responsive child protection services.

4.1.4. Recognising the Contribution of Foster Parents

The findings reinforce the importance of recognising foster parents as active partners in supervision and monitoring processes rather than solely as recipients of professional oversight.

4.1.5. Strengthening Supervision

Participants highlighted the importance of supportive supervision for social workers. Organisations should therefore strengthen supervisory processes that promote professional guidance, accountability, and reflective practice.

4.1.6. Informing Policy Development

The findings suggest that child protection policies could give greater recognition to collaborative caregiving, cultural responsiveness, and family and community participation when developing foster care supervision and monitoring guidelines.

4.1.7. Developing Africentric Practice Frameworks

The study provides empirical support for developing an Africentric foster care supervision and monitoring framework that is responsive to the South African child protection context while complementing statutory requirements.

4.1.8. Informing Professional Education

The findings highlight the importance of preparing current and future social workers to understand both their statutory responsibilities and the relational and cultural dimensions of foster care practice.

4.1.9. Future Research

Future research should examine how Africentric principles can be operationalised within foster care supervision and monitoring, including the development and evaluation of culturally grounded practice models and assessment tools.

4.1.10. Expanding the Evidence Base

Future research should include foster children, foster parents, biological families, community members, and policy developers to further strengthen the understanding of positive role fulfilment from multiple perspectives and across different contexts.

4.2. Limitations of the Study

The study is not without limitations. It was conducted within a single district in the North-West province of South Africa, and the small, purposively selected sample of social workers may not reflect the experiences of practitioners across the country. The perspectives of children and foster parents were not included, meaning their insights into the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders and role players within the foster care system were not captured. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted as reflecting the professional perspectives of participating social workers rather than the direct experiences of all members of the foster child's care circle. Additionally, participants may have been hesitant to openly discuss organisational challenges that hinder effective foster care supervision and monitoring. The roles and responsibilities of stakeholders and elements identified in this study are unlikely to be exhaustive, and additional factors may emerge when the study involves other role players that are mentioned broadly in the Children's Act 38 of 2005. Another limitation of the study is that it only made use of a qualitative approach. The inherent limitations of qualitative studies include the lack of generalisability of findings, mainly due to their reliance on a small number of participants. A mixed-methods study could have produced generalisable findings.

5. Conclusions

The study explored social workers' perspectives on positive role fulfilment among foster parents, social workers, and social work supervisors within the foster child's care

circle. The findings suggest that, from the perspectives of the participating social workers, positive role fulfilment extends beyond performing legislated responsibilities for children's well-being. Participants consistently emphasised that they perceived effective foster care to depend on role players' understanding and fulfilling their respective responsibilities while working together to support children throughout the foster care placement.

Role Theory and Identity Theory provide a useful explanation for these findings by demonstrating that effective foster care depends not only on understanding the expectations associated with particular roles but also on internalising those responsibilities as part of one's professional or caregiving identity [23]. The Africentric perspective adopted in this study further provides a culturally grounded lens for interpreting participants' emphasis on interconnectedness, collective responsibility, and children's sense of belonging within families and communities. Rather than suggesting that participants explicitly articulated these theoretical perspectives, they offer a framework for understanding why participants consistently associated positive role fulfilment with collaborative relationships that promote children's holistic well-being.

Although many of the responsibilities described by participants are reflected in South African legislation and policy, the study's contribution lies in demonstrating how positive role fulfilment is understood and enacted within the foster child's care circle. The findings shift attention beyond statutory compliance towards the relational, collaborative, and culturally responsive dimensions of foster care practice. In doing so, the study provides preliminary empirical support, based for the development of an Africentric foster care supervision and monitoring framework that is responsive to the South African context while strengthening practice, policy and future research.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, O.T.-M., L.H.-S. and S.S.; methodology, S.S., L.H.-S. and O.T.-M.; software, S.S. and O.T.-M.; validation, O.T.-M.; formal analysis, S.S., L.H.-S. and O.T.-M.; investigation, O.T.-M.; resources, O.T.-M.; data curation, S.S., O.T.-M. and L.H.-S.; writing—original draft preparation, O.T.-M., S.S. and L.H.-S.; writing—review and editing, O.T.-M., S.S. and L.H.-S.; visualization, O.T.-M., S.S. and L.H.-S.; supervision, L.H.-S. and S.S.; project administration, O.T.-M. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Pretoria, South Africa (protocol code 25419758 (HUM006/0724), 28 November 2024).

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

Data Availability Statement: The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because of ethical restrictions.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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