Assessment of Knowledge and Perceived Vulnerabilities in Foster Care Systems among Social Work Students in Babcock University

ABSTRACT

This study assesses the knowledge and perceived vulnerabilities in foster care systems among 128 social work students at Babcock University. The purpose of the study is to examine the influence of academic exposure and training, including coursework and fieldwork, on students' knowledge and perceptions of foster care systems. A quantitative research design was used, with data collected through a structured questionnaire. Descriptive statistics and regression analysis were employed to test the research hypotheses. The results show that students possess moderate to high levels of knowledge regarding foster care laws and permanency planning, but gaps remain in their understanding of practical monitoring systems. Regarding perceived vulnerabilities, students expressed significant concern over monitoring inadequacies and physical abuse risks within foster care placements. Regression analysis revealed that academic exposure significantly predicted students' knowledge of foster care systems (β = 0.32, p = 0.01). Additionally, academic exposure and fieldwork experience significantly predicted students' perceptions of vulnerabilities in foster care placements (β = 0.38, p = 0.00). The findings highlight the need for enhanced fieldwork programs, improved caregiver training, and stronger monitoring mechanisms within foster care systems. These results have implications for social work education and child protection policy, suggesting reforms to improve training and better prepare social workers to address foster care vulnerabilities.
Keywords: Foster Care, Social Work Students, Academic Exposure, Perceived Vulnerabilities, Child Protection.

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I. Introduction
Background to the Study

Foster care systems form an essential pillar of global child protection frameworks, offering temporary family-based care for children who cannot remain with their biological families due to neglect, abuse, abandonment, or other forms of vulnerability. In countries such as the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, foster care operations are supported by regulatory guidelines, standardised caregiver training, and strong supervision mechanisms (Brown & Campbell, 2021). Despite these structures, global research continues to highlight persistent risks, including placement instability, inadequate caregiver preparation, and exposure to emotional or physical harm within foster homes (Hollingsworth & García, 2022). These recurring concerns underscore the indispensable role of professional knowledge and skilled social workers in safeguarding children within alternative care systems.

Across Africa, foster care systems face more pronounced structural and institutional challenges. Limited funding, cultural preferences for informal kinship care, weak monitoring systems, and insufficient professional capacity contribute to heightened vulnerabilities among children in placement (Mokone, 2023). In many cases, poor training of caregivers and inadequate child protection infrastructure increase the likelihood of neglect, exploitation, and trafficking (Osei-Tutu & Frempong, 2021). Given these realities, the demand for competent social workers who can assess foster homes, monitor placements, and provide evidence-based interventions is greater than ever.

In Nigeria, the Child Rights Act (CRA) of 2003 provides the legal basis for foster care operations and mandates state authorities to regulate alternative childcare arrangements. Nevertheless, implementation remains inconsistent, and gaps persist in monitoring and accountability. Studies indicate that children in foster care may still experience maltreatment, domestic servitude, harmful cultural practices, and exploitation due to poor regulatory oversight and minimal training for foster caregivers (Adeyemi & Akintunde, 2020; Oladipo, 2022). The recent rise in media reports exposing illegal foster homes, child trafficking rings, and cases of abuse demonstrates systemic weaknesses in the Nigerian child welfare sector (Okoye & Nwankwo, 2023). These issues highlight the significance of equipping social workers with the knowledge and competencies required to mitigate vulnerabilities within foster placements.

Training gaps among social work students further complicate the situation. Although social workers are expected to play critical roles in child assessment, foster parent screening, psychosocial support, and case management, many students report limited practical exposure to foster care systems during their undergraduate training (Eze & Adeleke, 2021). The resulting knowledge gap threatens the effectiveness of future practitioners and increases the likelihood of poor decision-making in child placement processes. Historically, social workers in Nigeria have contributed meaningfully to community sensitisation, child protection advocacy, and care planning. However, their involvement in foster care continues to be constrained by systemic limitations, insufficient practice environments, and inadequate professional preparation (Umar & Ibrahim, 2024).

Given these realities, there is a pressing need to examine social work students' understanding of foster care systems and their perceptions of vulnerabilities in foster placements. Such knowledge is critical to strengthening social work education, informing curriculum reforms, and enhancing child protection practice. It is within this context that the present study focuses on the Assessment of Knowledge and Perceived Vulnerabilities in Foster Care Systems among Social Work Students in Babcock University.

Statement of the Problem

In an ideal scenario, foster care in Nigeria would provide children with safe, nurturing environments, rigorous supervision, and professionally guided case management. However, despite existing laws and policy frameworks, the reality is far less optimal. Weak enforcement of the Child Rights Act, limited institutional capacity, and poor monitoring allow harmful practices to persist (Adeyemi & Akintunde, 2020). Several recent incidents, including the discovery of unlicensed foster homes, rising cases of child exploitation, and documented maltreatment by foster caregivers, demonstrate that foster care vulnerabilities remain a significant concern (Okoye & Nwankwo, 2023). These issues reveal a dangerous disconnect between policy intent and practical implementation.

The consequences of inadequate foster care oversight extend beyond individual harm. Children exposed to adverse foster placements may suffer long-term emotional trauma, social maladjustment, school dropout, and increased vulnerability to street hawking and exploitation (Musa & Ibrahim, 2021). These challenges undermine not only Nigeria's commitment to child protection but also broader global goals of ensuring safe and supportive environments for vulnerable populations.

Existing literature has addressed several aspects of child protection and foster care in Nigeria and Africa more broadly. Scholars have examined caregiver capacity (Osei-Tutu & Frempong, 2021), gaps in policy implementation (Oladipo, 2022), and challenges within social work education (Eze & Adeleke, 2021). However, there remains limited empirical evidence on the readiness of social work students, who represent the next generation of practitioners, to engage effectively with foster care systems. More importantly, previous studies have not specifically assessed the knowledge of foster

care structures and perceived vulnerabilities among social work students at Babcock University.

Purpose of the Study
The purpose of this study is to;

> *Examine the influence of academic exposure and training on social work students' knowledge and perceptions of foster care systems.*
>
> *Assess how academic training, including coursework and fieldwork, affects students' understanding of foster care systems and their awareness of vulnerabilities within these placements.*

Research Hypotheses
H01: Academic exposure or training does not significantly predict students' knowledge of foster care systems.

H02: Academic exposure or training does not significantly predict students' perceived vulnerabilities in foster care placements.

Significance of the Study
The significance of this study is multifaceted and contributes meaningfully to scholarship, policy, and professional practice within the child welfare sector. Theoretically, the study enriches contemporary discourse on child protection by examining how knowledge and perception influence the preparedness of emerging social workers to engage in foster care practice. By exploring these constructs among social work students, the study provides insights that can strengthen theoretical models linking educational exposure, professional competence, and child welfare outcomes.

Empirically, this research addresses a notable gap in Nigerian and African literature by generating current data on social work students' understanding of foster care systems and their perceptions of vulnerabilities inherent in such placements. As recent studies have emphasised structural weaknesses in foster care oversight, the production of fresh empirical evidence is critical to informing both academic and practice communities. The data derived from this study thereby offer a foundation for evaluating the effectiveness of existing training programs in preparing students for child protection responsibilities.

From a policy perspective, the findings hold potential value for government bodies, professional councils, and child welfare agencies seeking to improve national foster care guidelines and regulatory frameworks. By identifying knowledge gaps and perceived vulnerabilities, the study can inform the development of targeted training modules, monitoring strategies, and competency-based standards that enhance the protection of children placed in alternative care settings.

The study also contributes to the broader reservoir of knowledge by expanding academic understanding of foster care issues in Nigeria an area where research remains limited. It situates the conversation within the context of higher education, a crucial site for shaping the next generation of child protection professionals. In doing so, it adds depth to the literature on social work education and alternative care systems.

Furthermore, the study serves as a stepping stone for future research, offering baseline data that subsequent scholars can build upon when conducting comparative, longitudinal, institutional, or intervention-based studies. Its conceptualisation of predictors of knowledge and perception also provides a framework for future inquiry into workforce readiness and professional development.

Finally, the practical utility of this research is significant. The findings will be valuable to educators designing curricula, social work departments reviewing fieldwork programs, practitioners engaged in child welfare service delivery, and organisations working with vulnerable children. As a resource material, the study can guide training workshops, inform public awareness initiatives, and support decision-making processes within child protection agencies. Through these contributions, the study ensures both academic relevance and real-world applicability.

Scope of the Study
The study focuses exclusively on undergraduate social work students at Babcock University. It examines their knowledge of foster care systems and their perceptions of vulnerabilities within such placements. Conceptually, the study limits itself to knowledge, perceived vulnerabilities, and relevant demographic predictors.

Operational Definitions of Key Terms

Foster Care: A temporary family-based arrangement for children approved and supervised by the state.

Knowledge of Foster Care: Understanding of policies, processes, and professional responsibilities involved in foster care.

Perceived Vulnerabilities: Students' awareness of risks and weaknesses within foster care settings.

Social Work Students: Individuals enrolled in the undergraduate Social Work program at Babcock University.

Predictors: Factors that statistically influence knowledge or perceptions.

II.   Literature Review

Foster care systems play a central role within global child protection frameworks, though their structure and effectiveness vary significantly across regions. In high-income countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada, foster care models typically rely on formal licensing processes, standardised caregiver training, and continuous supervision by child welfare agencies. These systems operate under extensive regulations that emphasise safety, permanency planning, and trauma-informed interventions designed to support children who have experienced abuse, neglect, or abandonment. Yet, even in these well-resourced contexts, persistent challenges remain. Research continues to document issues such as unstable placements, inadequate caregiver competence, and insufficient therapeutic support for children recovering from trauma, indicating that vulnerabilities exist regardless of structural sophistication (Brown & Campbell, 2021; Hollingsworth & García, 2022).

Across African countries, foster care takes different forms, often combining aspects of formal alternative care with longstanding traditions of kinship caregiving. Kinship placements, while culturally grounded and widespread, frequently occur outside the purview of government regulation. As a result, many placements lack proper screening, training, or monitoring, making children susceptible to neglect, exploitation, and trafficking. Several studies highlight the structural limitations that characterise foster care systems in Africa, including underfunding, weak regulatory frameworks, limited professional capacity, and inadequate training of those involved in child welfare (Mokone, 2023; Osei-Tutu & Frempong, 2021). These systemic weaknesses underscore the need for enhanced institutional mechanisms and a well-prepared social work workforce to safeguard vulnerable children.

In Nigeria, the Child Rights Act of 2003 provides a legal foundation for foster care, outlining procedures for placement, monitoring, and the protection of children's rights. However, despite this legislative framework, implementation across states remains inconsistent. The country continues to grapple with challenges such as irregular supervision of foster homes, inadequate child protection personnel, and limited awareness among the public regarding foster care regulations. Recent reports of abuse in foster settings, the proliferation of unlicensed homes, and the persistence of child trafficking and domestic servitude highlight significant gaps that undermine Nigeria's child welfare goals (Adeyemi & Akintunde, 2020; Okoye & Nwankwo, 2023). Although Nigeria is a signatory to international child rights instruments such as the UNCRC and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, the translation of these commitments into effective practice remains hindered by resource constraints and systemic inefficiencies (Musa & Ibrahim, 2021).

These realities highlight the critical importance of knowledge among social workers who are central to foster care practice. Competent social workers require strong cognitive and analytical abilities that enable them to assess children's needs, evaluate foster parents, and develop appropriate intervention plans. They must understand child development, trauma responses, placement dynamics, and risk factors affecting children who enter foster care. Equally important is legal and ethical literacy, encompassing a deep understanding of relevant laws, regulations, professional standards, and ethical obligations guiding work with vulnerable children (Oladipo, 2022; Umar & Ibrahim, 2024). Without adequate preparation in these domains, social workers may be unable to identify or mitigate vulnerabilities in foster placements, thereby compromising child safety.

Studies consistently demonstrate that training, coursework, and field exposure significantly influence the knowledge levels and competencies of social work students. Those who receive targeted

instruction on child welfare systems or engage in practicum experiences within child protection agencies tend to demonstrate a stronger understanding of foster care processes and greater confidence in handling child welfare cases (Eze & Adeleke, 2021). However, many Nigerian social work programs struggle to provide adequate practical experiences due to limited institutional partnerships, resource constraints, and overcrowded field placements. Consequently, students often graduate with theoretical knowledge but insufficient familiarity with real-world complexities, a gap that may compromise their readiness to assume child protection roles.

Understanding the vulnerabilities inherent in foster care systems is essential for effective social work practice. Children placed in foster care frequently present with complex emotional and behavioural challenges stemming from prior neglect, abuse, or separation from caregivers. Placement instability—such as frequent moves between foster homes—can further exacerbate trauma, disrupt attachment, and hinder developmental progress (Brown & Campbell, 2021). The absence of adequate caregiver training compounds these vulnerabilities, as unprepared foster parents may struggle to meet the psychosocial needs of traumatised children. In Nigeria, weak monitoring structures have allowed harmful practices to persist, including emotional maltreatment, physical abuse, and exploitation of foster children for domestic labour (Adeyemi & Akintunde, 2020). Cultural factors also shape foster care outcomes. Kinship care, while culturally valued, often occurs informally and without state oversight, creating conditions in which children's rights may be compromised (Musa & Ibrahim, 2021).

Social work education plays a pivotal role in addressing these challenges. Contemporary social work curricula are expected to equip students with foundational knowledge of child development, social policy, human behaviour, and intervention methods relevant to child welfare. In theory, these curricula should prepare students to evaluate foster homes, develop care plans, and advocate for children's rights. However, gaps persist between curriculum expectations and practice realities. Many programs lack adequate specialisation in child protection or trauma-informed care, and fieldwork placements often fail to expose students to child welfare settings where they can apply theoretical knowledge. International best practices demonstrate the value of simulation training, structured supervision, and exposure to diverse child welfare environments, resources that remain limited within many Nigerian institutions (Hollingsworth & García, 2022; Umar & Ibrahim, 2024).

Empirical research offers further insight into the challenges and opportunities for improving foster care systems. Studies in West Africa and globally have shown that caregiver training improves children's well-being, that monitoring gaps heighten vulnerability, and that practitioner knowledge is strongly linked to outcomes for children in alternative care (Osei-Tutu & Frempong, 2021; Adeyemi & Akintunde, 2020; Brown & Campbell, 2021). Mokone (2023) found that systemic underinvestment in child protection infrastructure significantly undermines alternative care systems in South Africa. Yet, despite these contributions, limited empirical attention has been given to the preparedness of social work students in Nigeria, even though they represent the future professional workforce. No studies to date have specifically examined the knowledge and perceived vulnerabilities associated with foster care among social work students at Babcock University. Thus, the present study addresses a distinct gap in the literature by exploring how educational exposure shapes students' understanding of foster care systems and their perceptions of associated risks.

The theoretical framework underpinning this study draws primarily from Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which conceptualises human development as occurring within interrelated systems ranging from immediate environments to broader societal structures. Applied to foster care, this theory suggests that children's experiences are shaped by complex interactions among caregivers, social workers, agencies, communities, and policy environments (Hollingsworth & García, 2022). The Child Rights Approach complements this perspective by emphasising children's inherent rights to protection, participation, and well-being across all care settings. Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive lens for analysing how structural, educational, and interpersonal factors interact to influence social work students' knowledge and perceptions.

Anchored in these theoretical foundations, the conceptual framework for this study proposes that students' demographic characteristics, educational exposure, and coursework serve as predictors of their knowledge of foster care systems. This knowledge, in turn, shapes their perceptions of

vulnerabilities within foster care placements. Understanding these relationships is critical for strengthening social work training and improving foster care outcomes in Nigeria.

III.   Methodology
This study used a quantitative research design to assess the knowledge and perceived vulnerabilities in foster care systems among undergraduate social work students at Babcock University. A descriptive, cross-sectional survey approach was employed, which is appropriate for collecting data from a defined population at a single point in time. This design allows for the systematic assessment of students' knowledge levels and perceptions of vulnerabilities in foster care placements, enabling a clear analysis of patterns and predictors relevant to the study objectives.

Study Population
The study focused on undergraduate students enrolled in the Department of Social Work at Babcock University. The target population comprised students in the 200-level, 300-level, and 400-level courses, as these cohorts have received varying degrees of academic exposure to child welfare, family systems, and social work practice, including relevant coursework and fieldwork experiences. The 200, 300, and 400-level students were included because they had received foundational, intermediate, and advanced coursework in social work, providing a broader perspective on their knowledge and perceptions of foster care. The total population of the study included 186 students, distributed across the three academic levels.

Sample Size Determination and Sampling Technique
To determine an appropriate sample size, the Yamane (1967) formula for sample size determination was used. The formula is given as:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e^2)}$$

Where:
(n) is the sample size
(N) is the population size (229 students in this case)
(e) is the margin of error (5% or 0.05)

Applying the formula:

$$n = \frac{186}{1 + 186(0.05^2)} = \frac{186}{1 + 0.5725} \approx 118$$

Thus, the required sample size for this study was 118 students.

A stratified random sampling technique was employed to ensure proportional representation of students from each academic level. This technique was chosen to account for the differing levels of academic exposure and training among the students. Each academic level, 200-level, 300-level, and 400-level, was treated as a stratum. From each stratum, participants were randomly selected in proportion to the number of students in each level, ensuring that all levels were adequately represented in the sample.

Instruments for Data Collection
Data were collected through a structured questionnaire specifically designed for this study. The questionnaire was divided into three sections. The first section gathered demographic information, including age, gender, level of study, and fieldwork experience. The second section assessed students' knowledge of foster care systems, focusing on their understanding of foster care policies, procedures for placement and monitoring, and the roles of social workers in foster care settings. The third section assessed students' perceptions of vulnerabilities in foster care placements, including concerns about abuse, placement instability, inadequate caregiver preparation, and gaps in monitoring systems.

Most items in sections two and three used Likert-type scales to capture students' attitudes, knowledge levels, and perceptions. A five-point Likert scale was used to assess attitudes and perceptions, with options ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree." Some items used mixed Likert scales to assess knowledge, with options ranging from "Very Low" to "Very High." This

format allowed for nuanced measurement of students' knowledge and perceptions and facilitated the analysis of quantifiable data suitable for statistical analysis.

Validity and Reliability of Instruments

To ensure the validity of the questionnaire, the instrument was reviewed by experts in social work, child welfare, and measurement and evaluation. These experts assessed the clarity, relevance, and alignment of each item with the study's objectives. Based on their feedback, minor revisions were made to improve the wording and structure of the items, ensuring content validity.

The reliability of the instrument was tested through a pilot study conducted with a small sample of social work students who were not included in the main study. The pilot test data were analyzed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient to assess internal consistency. The resulting reliability coefficient was 0.78, indicating acceptable internal consistency for the subscales. Items with lower reliability scores were revised to enhance the overall consistency of the instrument.

Method of Data Collection

Data collection was conducted using in-person methods. Questionnaires were distributed to students in the 200, 300, and 400-level classes during class sessions, ensuring accessibility and convenience for the participants.

The study adhered to strict ethical guidelines throughout the data collection process. Participation was voluntary, and all students were provided with clear information regarding the purpose of the study, the confidentiality of their responses, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequences. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before administering the questionnaires.

Method of Data Analysis

Data from the completed questionnaires were coded and entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for analysis. Descriptive statistics and inferential statistical tests, such as regression analysis, were employed to test the study's hypotheses. The level of significance was set at $p \leq 0.05$ for all statistical tests.

IV.   Results
Demographic Information

Table 1: Demographic Information of Participants

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Age Group		
18-22 years	55	46.61%
23-26 years	40	33.90%
27-30 years	18	15.25%
Above 30 years	5	4.23%
Gender		
Male	40	33.90%
Female	78	66.10%
Level of Study		
200-level	37	31.36%
300-level	41	34.75%
400-level	40	33.90%
Fieldwork Experience		
Yes	68	57.63%
No	50	42.37%

The sample consisted mostly of younger students, with 46.61% in the 18-22 age group, and

66.10% were female. The participants were fairly distributed across academic levels, with the largest group in the 300-level (34.75%). Over half (57.63%) had fieldwork experience, while 42.37% did not. The sample reflects a diverse mix of age, gender, academic level, and practical experience.

Hypothesis Testing

H01: Academic exposure or training does not significantly predict students' knowledge of foster care systems.

Table 2: Regression Analysis for Predicting Knowledge of Foster Care Systems Based on Academic Exposure

Predictor	β-value	Standard Error	t-value	p-value	Interpretation
Academic Exposure (Courses)	0.32	0.11	2.91	0.01	Significant predictor of knowledge
Fieldwork Exposure	0.24	0.09	2.68	0.02	Significant predictor of knowledge

The regression analysis presented in Table 2 investigates the impact of academic exposure (both coursework and fieldwork) on students' knowledge of foster care systems.

The first predictor, academic exposure through coursework, has a β-value of 0.32, with a t-value of 2.91 and a p-value of 0.01. Since the p-value is less than the 0.05 significance level, we reject the null hypothesis (H01), which posits that academic exposure does not significantly predict students' knowledge of foster care systems. Therefore, we conclude that academic exposure through coursework is a significant predictor of students' knowledge.

Similarly, the second predictor, fieldwork exposure, shows a β-value of 0.24, with a t-value of 2.68 and a p-value of 0.02. Given that the p-value is also less than 0.05, we reject the null hypothesis for fieldwork exposure as well. This indicates that fieldwork experience significantly contributes to students' knowledge of foster care systems.

Hence, both academic exposure through courses and fieldwork experience significantly predict students' knowledge of foster care systems, leading us to reject the null hypothesis (H01) in favor of the alternative hypothesis.

H02: Academic exposure or training does not significantly predict students' perceived vulnerabilities in foster care placements.

Table 3: Regression Analysis for Predicting Perceived Vulnerabilities in Foster Care Based on Academic Exposure

Predictor	β-value	Standard Error	t-value	p-value	Interpretation
Training on Foster Care	0.38	0.10	3.80	0.00	Significant predictor of perceived vulnerabilities
Fieldwork Exposure	0.27	0.08	3.38	0.01	Significant predictor of perceived vulnerabilities

The regression analysis presented in Table 3 examines the relationship between academic exposure, including training on foster care and fieldwork exposure, and students' perceived vulnerabilities in foster care placements.

The first predictor, training on foster care, has a β-value of 0.38, with a t-value of 3.80 and a p-value of 0.00. Since the p-value is less than the 0.05 significance level, we reject the null hypothesis (H02), which posits that academic exposure does not significantly predict students' perceived vulnerabilities in foster care placements. This indicates that training on foster care is a significant predictor of students' awareness of vulnerabilities within foster care systems.

Similarly, the second predictor, fieldwork exposure, has a β-value of 0.27, with a t-value of 3.38 and a p-value of 0.01. Since the p-value is also below the 0.05 threshold, we reject the null hypothesis for fieldwork exposure as well. This shows that fieldwork exposure significantly influences students' perceptions of vulnerabilities in foster care placements.

In conclusion, both training on foster care and fieldwork exposure significantly predict students' perceived vulnerabilities in foster care placements, leading us to reject the null hypothesis (H02) and accept that academic exposure and fieldwork experience are important factors in shaping students' perceptions of risks and challenges within foster care systems.

V.   Discussion

The findings of this study reveal important insights into both the knowledge levels and perceptions of vulnerabilities among social work students in Babcock University, particularly with regard to foster care systems. The study found that students possess moderate to high levels of knowledge, especially in areas such as foster care laws and permanency planning. These findings align with past research, which suggests that academic exposure, through coursework and training, plays a positive role in enhancing students' knowledge of key concepts related to child welfare and foster care (Eze & Adeleke, 2021). However, despite the overall positive outcomes, gaps remain in students' understanding of practical monitoring systems within foster care. While students can identify the theoretical frameworks and policies surrounding foster care, their practical understanding of how these frameworks are implemented in real-world settings appears to be less developed. This highlights a critical area for improvement in social work education, where students may need more hands-on experience and direct involvement in foster care systems to bridge this gap.

In terms of perceived vulnerabilities, students identified high levels of concern, particularly regarding monitoring inadequacies and the risk of physical abuse in foster care placements. These findings mirror broader concerns within the Nigerian foster care system, where the lack of consistent monitoring, insufficient caregiver training, and weak enforcement of regulations have been cited as ongoing issues (Okoye & Nwankwo, 2023). Students' perceptions of these vulnerabilities reflect the realities faced by children in foster care, as many foster homes are not subject to rigorous oversight, leading to risks such as abuse, exploitation, and neglect.

The findings regarding knowledge levels in this study are consistent with international studies that suggest social work students often graduate with a solid theoretical understanding of child welfare but lack practical knowledge. Eze & Adeleke (2021) noted that despite comprehensive academic coursework, many students in social work programs still struggle with the application of their knowledge in real-world settings. This lack of practical exposure limits their ability to effectively engage in child welfare tasks, such as monitoring foster placements and assessing caregiver suitability. This gap between theory and practice is a recurring theme in the global literature on social work education.

Similarly, the findings on vulnerabilities identified by students align with research conducted in other African countries. In contexts like South Africa and Ghana, studies have shown that monitoring inadequacies and the risk of abuse are common concerns among both practitioners and students in the field of child welfare (Mokone, 2023). These vulnerabilities are often rooted in systemic challenges, such as limited resources, undertrained staff, and weak enforcement of laws designed to protect children in foster care. The Nigerian foster care system shares these systemic issues, further emphasising the need for reform at the national level.

The findings of this study carry significant implications for both policy and practice within Nigerian social welfare systems. One of the main recommendations for policy reform is the strengthening of monitoring frameworks for foster care placements. This includes ensuring that foster homes are regularly inspected, caregivers are properly trained, and that there are systems in place to track the well-being of children in foster care. Additionally, enforcing stricter regulations on foster care placements is crucial. Government bodies should ensure that all foster homes, whether formal or informal, meet the required standards for child protection, and that violators are held accountable.

From a curriculum perspective, social work departments should integrate more practical fieldwork experiences into their programs. This will help bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and real-world application. By placing students in foster care environments or other child welfare settings, they will be able to apply their academic knowledge in a hands-on context, enhancing their preparedness to engage in child protection work upon graduation. Social work programs should also focus on developing students' skills in trauma-informed care, caregiver

assessment, and placement monitoring, all of which are essential to addressing the vulnerabilities identified in this study.

Lastly, there is a need for continuous training for both social workers and foster caregivers. Social workers should receive ongoing professional development opportunities that enhance their understanding of foster care policies, monitoring practices, and child welfare issues. Similarly, foster caregivers should undergo regular training to improve their caregiving skills and knowledge of child development. Implementing better tracking systems to monitor foster placements will also help reduce vulnerabilities by ensuring that children receive the care they need and that foster homes adhere to established standards.

In conclusion, the findings underscore the need for comprehensive reforms within Nigeria's foster care system, with particular emphasis on improving the training and monitoring of both social workers and caregivers. Through these changes, the safety and well-being of children in foster care can be better safeguarded, and social work students will be more adequately prepared for their roles in child protection.

VI. Conclusion

This study assessed social work students' knowledge of foster care systems and their perceptions of vulnerabilities in placements. Findings show moderate knowledge and a high level of concern about system vulnerabilities, which aligns with existing literature on gaps in foster care practices. This research contributes to understanding how educational exposure influences future practitioners and informs recommendations for policy reform and curriculum development.

VII. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be made to improve both social work education and foster care practices in Nigeria.

For the Babcock University Social Work Department, it is crucial to enhance the fieldwork programs by integrating more hands-on experiences in child welfare settings. While academic coursework provides a foundation of knowledge, real-world exposure to foster care systems is essential for students to apply their learning effectively. Increased involvement in child welfare placements will better prepare students for the challenges they will face in their professional careers, improving their understanding of both the theory and practice of social work.

For Nigerian Child Protection Agencies, it is vital to improve the training of foster caregivers and strengthen monitoring efforts to ensure the safety and well-being of children in foster care. Caregiver training should focus on trauma-informed care, child development, and the legal and ethical responsibilities that come with fostering. Furthermore, enhanced monitoring mechanisms should be established to track foster care placements more rigorously and ensure compliance with child protection standards. This will help mitigate risks such as abuse and neglect, which are concerns highlighted by the study participants.

For Future Research, longitudinal studies should be conducted to track changes in social work students' knowledge and perceptions of foster care systems as they transition into the workforce. These studies can provide insights into how academic exposure and professional experience influence their readiness and effectiveness in identifying and addressing vulnerabilities within foster care. This will help evaluate whether social work education is adequately preparing students to address real-world child protection challenges.

VIII. Limitations of the Study

While this study provides valuable insights, there are several limitations that should be considered.

One limitation is self-report bias. As participants were asked to assess their own knowledge and perceptions, they may have overestimated their understanding or underreported vulnerabilities within the foster care system. Social desirability bias could also influence responses, as participants may have been inclined to provide socially acceptable answers regarding their knowledge and attitudes.

Another limitation is the limited generalizability of the findings. Since the study was

conducted at Babcock University, the results may not apply to social work students at other universities in Nigeria or internationally. The unique characteristics of the sample—comprising only undergraduate students from one institution- may not reflect the broader student population.

Lastly, the sample size constraints are a factor to consider. While the sample size was adequate for statistical analysis, it could be expanded in future research to include a more diverse range of institutions and a larger pool of participants. This would help provide more robust and generalizable findings, enhancing the external validity of the study.

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