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CHILD WELFARE WORKERS' PERSPECTIVES ON PLACEMENT INSTABILITY AND THE IMPACTS ON FOSTER YOUTH

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INSTABILITY AND THE IMPACTS ON FOSTER YOUTH

A Project

Presented to the

Faculty of

California State University,

San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Social Work

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by

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ABSTRACT

In this study, the researchers explored child welfare workers' perceptions on placement changes for youth in foster care and the impact these changes had on youths' overall outcomes. Using a Post Positivist paradigm, qualitative research was completed using snowball-sampling procedures. The researchers conducted in-depth interviews with sixteen members from their personal networks of child welfare social workers that have direct contact with foster youth. The research participants included current child welfare social workers from two counties in Southern California. The study's findings suggest that children's behaviors and foster parents' reactions to those behaviors impacted placement changes. Further, participants felt that these changes significantly impacted youths' educational outcomes. Participants identified a variety of interventions they used to try to mitigate placement changes, some with more or less success. Finally, workers identified barriers within the child welfare system, including communications and compensation, that might have an impact on placement changes. Implications for social work practice, policy and research are discussed.

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CHAPTER ONE

ASSESSMENT

Introduction

In this chapter, the researchers discuss the focus of the research. This chapter explains the post positivist paradigm, or worldview, that was chosen to conduct this research. There is a discussion regarding the review of research literature related to this research focus. Finally, this chapter explores the potential contributions to the field of social worker in both macro and micro practice settings.

Research Focus

This research incorporated a post positivist paradigm approach to the research focus. The research focus of this study is the negative effects placement changes have on youth in the foster care system. This includes identifying placement instability as a key issue in child welfare, discussing its implications, and identifying prevention and intervention efforts used in the field to reduce placement changes. For the purposes of this research, a placement change refers to moving a foster child from one foster home to another, and included one or more changes in placement. The types of placement changes included in this research are identified as a removal from any one of the following placements, including the initial removal from the youth's biological home to: a

shelter, any type of foster home, any level group home, certified relative, certified non-related extended family member, residential treatment facility, psychiatric or medical hospitalization, juvenile hall, and/or runaway status. As outlined in the literature review, many foster children experience multiple placement changes, which negatively impacts their well-being. These changes can lead to poor educational outcomes for foster youth including low graduation rates, as well as having a negative social impact on children. This phenomenon is an important aspect of the child welfare system whose goals include the safety, permanency, and well-being of children.

This research answered the following questions regarding the impacts of placement instability on youth in the foster care system: How often are children being moved from home to home in foster care? How are children directly effected by placement changes in foster care? And how can we help reduce placement changes and increase positive outcomes for this already disadvantaged population? This research explored the child welfare social workers' perspectives on placement instability and the repercussions faced by the foster youth they work with. This research made efforts to develop and expand theories and strategies to prevent placement moves for foster youth.

Paradigm and Rationale for Chosen Paradigm

The perspective adopted in this research was a Post Positivist approach. According to Morris (2013), a Post Positivist paradigm,

Concurs that, indeed, an objective reality exists but suggests that the 'immutable laws and mechanisms' driving that reality can never be fully comprehended. Qualitative measurement and hypothesis testing only offers part of the picture; the rest must be discovered through open exploration. (p. 41)

The study gathered qualitative data from social workers to identify and analyze common assumptions to help build new theory and themes regarding reducing placement changes and improving the outcomes of foster youth. This paradigm called for neutrality of the researchers while finding reality in the most naturalistic setting. The Post Positivist approach was chosen, as it is most appropriate for this study, and because it allowed for effective gathering of natural, qualitative data.

Qualitative data gathered in a naturalistic setting is a key method for studying this research focus, as it allowed for verbal data collection in a true and pure form. Qualitative data was collected from those with firsthand experience with this issue, which was key to identifying trends and developing theory. This was the best paradigm to address the problem statement because a post-positivist approach allowed this research to build theories of intervention with the child welfare systems to reduce placement changes and increase positive outcomes for foster youth. The researchers used the data to develop intervention and prevention strategies to help foster youth become more successful, as well as to prevent unnecessary placement changes for youth in foster care.

Literature Review

The literature review discusses the different experiences and outcomes for children in the foster care system with an emphasis on causes and predictors of placement instability, the impacts of placement instability on foster youth, intervention/prevention strategies, and educational and social implications for youth in foster care. This literature review demonstrates that foster youth face significant difficulties in their education and socialization as opposed to other children in their biological home environment. Common themes discussed are the lack of information needed to make sufficient decisions regarding a child's education, delay or loss of educational records due to placement and school district changes, lower academic achievements, socialization issues, and alternative theory to placement stability. Lastly, current placement move prevention and intervention strategies were reviewed.

<u>Adverse Experiences</u>

Foster youth are already at a disadvantage, as they face more adversity and barriers compared to their peers in school. According to Watson & Kabler (2012), "Compared to their peers, foster youth face significant educational difficulties, including lower levels of academic achievement, increased discipline referrals, and overrepresentation in special education," (p. 28). The authors suggest that foster youth are in need of support from multiple professionals to achieve better outcomes in their education. This support would likely include increased communication between school psychologists, mental health professionals, educational liaisons, teachers, foster parents, and biological

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parents. In relation to the research topic, we can see that foster youth face serious struggles when it comes to education both academically and socially. We know that more needs to be done to improve outcomes for our foster youth including better collaboration and communication between key stakeholders.

<u>Repercussions of Placement Changes</u>

The literature suggests that the more placement changes a foster youth has, the worse outcomes that child experiences. The outcomes for foster youth are typically much poorer than for non-foster youth peers. According to Waid and colleagues (2016), approximately 415,129 children were residing in out-of-home care in 2014, and approximately 22–70% of foster care placements will be disrupted, meaning youth will be moved from one placement to another, in any given year. Children who experience foster care placement change(s) are at greater risk of experiencing longer stays in foster care and the impacts on well-being can be substantially detrimental. Multiple placement changes have been proven to increase a child's behavior problems, thus leading to an increase in placement changes (Waid et al., 2016).

Placement changes also disrupt mental health services for foster children. The lack of continuity has resulted in an increase of emergency mental health needs for these youth. These youth are more susceptible to psychiatric hospitalizations and crisis intervention services than youth in stable placements (Waid et al., 2016). It is evident that foster youth have grave disadvantages in their life that can include emotional trauma, relationship issues, mental health issues, and educational difficulties. These issues appear to be exacerbated with

increased placement changes. This literature lays a foundation that placement changes are detrimental to the well-being of foster children, and leaves the door open to find out what needs to be done to reduce the number of placement changes and increase positive outcomes for foster youth.

Low Academic Achievements

The average number of placements for children in the foster care system is 3.1 placement changes (Levy et al., 2014). Research shows that foster youth most likely face a change in school districts as a result of these placement changes. This results in loss of records for a child, thus impeding their academic success. Levy and colleagues (2014) also found that placement changes have a direct correlation to low performance for foster youth in reading and mathematics, as well as a decrease in graduation rates. Furthermore, one fewer foster care placement per year increases a child's graduation rate to nearly twice as likely (Levy et al., 2014). In regards to this research, we learned the importance of preserving a foster placement as it pertains to a foster child's educational success. We saw that there is a need to address how social workers, the child welfare system, and our communities work together to reduce the number of times a child is moved from one foster home to another.

Loss of Pertinent Records

Research indicates that children in foster care have difficult times being successful in their education. Children who bounce around from one placement to another are at risk of having the transfer of educational records lost or delayed in delivery to the new school. This delay can result in missing information for

foster youth including special education needs, grades, accommodations, successes, and more, (The Legal Center for Foster Care & Education, 2018). If these records are lost or delayed, the child's new school may be unaware of the child's special needs, accommodations, previous classes taken, or even health issues. All of these are important for maintaining a child's educational success, and the more placement moves that occur, the more likely the child's records are to get misplaced.

Social Implications

It has been reported that placement changes, including changes in schools, not only impeded on academic success, but this also interrupts social connections a child may have. Some children develop relationships with school professionals that provided formal support for a child who was having issues with negative behaviors and/or emotions (Cohen, Kasen, Brook, & Struening, 1991). This research supports claims that a child can experience emotional damage after a placement change occurs, which creates further issues for children, and may result in another placement change.

Placement instability also has an impact on several other areas including emotional development, identity formation, and the development of positive social networks. Multiple placement changes can cause youth to become unwilling to form trusting relationships (Stott, 2012). Additionally, there is a correlation between placement instability and poor educational performance, identity confusion, low self-esteem, substance abuse, criminal activity and increased mental health care needs (Stott, 2012). This is concerning as these

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issues can have an impact on a youth's ability to attain adequate independent living skills and develop lasting relationships, which could assist them with achieving self-sufficiency.

Reducing Placement Changes, Alternative Theory

Some research has been done to provide a more in-depth look at how to preserve a child in his or her foster home. One model implemented in European foster care, practiced primarily in Germany, is called Kinderhaus (Allen & Vacca, 2010). Kinderhaus is a seven-story building that supports 244 residents that receive one on one support from teams of professionals including educators, social workers, and pedagogues. The role of the team members is to nurture the development of the emotionally damaged children. The team empowers children to build healthy relationship with others, and works with some of the parents, designing ways to address problems, improve parenting skills and showing them ways to rebuild family units (Allen & Vacca, 2010). Bearing in mind that approximately half the students at Kinderhaus have severe learning problems, "It is significant that even 1 to 2% of Kinderhaus residents go on to the universities; three quarters pass the General Certificate of Education (the equivalent of our U.S. High School Diploma), and 95% of Kinderhaus residents go on to vocational training," (Allen & Vacca, 2010, p.830).

The abovementioned research compared the educational success rates of foster youth in Germany to those in the United States. A 1998 Wisconsin study of 157 former foster care youth (12 to 18 months after leaving foster care) found that only 37% finished high school, 39% were employed, 32% were on public

assistance, 18% had been incarcerated, and several were struggling to obtain health care and mental health services (Allen & Vacca, 2010). The comparison of the poor outcomes for foster youth in Wisconsin highlights the potential opportunity to improve outcomes by adopting strategies, such as the Kinderhaus program, used in other countries. It provides some groundwork of what could be done to prevent placement changes and increase outcomes for foster youth. Adopting a model similar to the Kinderhaus model may increase academic success, graduation rates, employment rates, and overall well-being for foster youth in the United States.

Possible Causes and Predictors of Placement Instability

Placement disruptions are more prevalent for adolescents in foster care (Taylor & McQuillan, 2014). Some of the identified issues affecting placement disruption include the child's behavior (such as aggression and risk-taking behaviors), family contact and the child not adapting to the placement (Taylor & McQuillan, 2014). Children who display aggressive and/or dangerous behaviors are also likely to experience placement instability (Newton, Litrownik, & Landsverk, 2000). Another risk factor for placement disruption for children in foster care includes older children with signs of conduct disorder (Oosterman, Schuengel, Slot, Bullens, & Doreleijers, 2007). Additionally, children who are not placed with relatives are more likely to experience a placement disruption than those who are placed with relatives (Chamberlain et al., 2006).

In a study that evaluated what types of issues caused caregivers to make the decision to ask children to be moved from their homes, it was found that the

presence of physical and sexual violence was a strong contributing factor (Brown & Bednar, 2006).

Fallesen points out that children are placed in foster care so that they are able to experience stability (2014). However, for most children, this is not happening because very few children experience placement stability while in foster care. Children with a high number of risk factors prior to entering foster care, are more likely to continue to experience instability during the time they are placed in foster care (Fallesen, 2014).

Impact of Placement Instability

When exploring the impact that placement instability has on youth in foster care, it is important to consider the risky behaviors that foster youth sometimes exhibit. Stott (2012) stated that there is an increased likelihood that youth who have a history of placement instability will use substances. Stott (2012) also explains that although it would be expected that removing youth from high-risk environments and placing them in foster care would reduce risky behaviors and serve as a protective factor, research suggests that this is not the case. Stott (2012) suggests that placement instability might be a factor that increases the risk of foster youth to display problematic behaviors.

Understanding how placement instability impacts brain development is also important to consider because it can help explain some of the poor outcomes and negative consequences for adolescents in foster care. There is information in the literature that explains how maltreatment negatively impacts

brain development (Harden, Buhler, & Jimenez Parra, 2016). However, it seems equally beneficial to have a better understanding of the added impact of multiple placement changes for children who have already experienced maltreatment.

According to Fisher, Mannering, Van Scoyoc and Graham (2013), there is a correlation between placement instability and disrupted brain development. The authors explain that poor brain development can cause poor executive functioning, which can cause issues such as disruptive behavior disorders and substance abuse (Fisher et al., 2013). Therefore, adequate intervention and prevention strategies to improve this situation are important to consider. Through the concept of neural plasticity, children who have suffered the negative impacts of maltreatment, still have the potential for positive changes within the brain to occur (Fisher et al., 2013). The key for these positive changes to occur is placing children in an enriched environment (Fisher et al., 2013).

Youth who experience multiple placement changes also suffer emotionally as their negative experiences cause them to have difficulty forming trusting relationships (Unrau, Seita, & Putney, 2008). Other identified areas related to the negative aspects of placement instability include shutting down emotionally as well as experiencing various forms of loss including the loss of friends, personal belongings or being separated from siblings (Unrau, Seita, & Putney, 2008). Additionally, youth who experience placement instability are also likely to experience psychological issues (Fawley-King & Snowden, 2012).

<u>Caregiver Training and Intervention</u>

One way that disruptive behaviors can be addressed is through special training for caregivers in addition to mental health interventions (James, Landsverk, & Slymen, 2004). It has been found that placement stability is enhanced when foster parents are able to address problem behaviors, there is a "goodness of fit" and a "feeling of closeness" (Semanchin, Rittner & Affronti, 2016, p. 255). Foster parents should play an important role in improving outcomes for foster youth (Semanchin et al., 2016). Many foster parents report feeling unprepared to meet the needs of children in their care (Semanchin et al., 2016). Caregivers who are able to successfully support a functional adaptation process utilize a process that is dependent on the child and are actively committed to the child through uncertain legal processes as well as the child's acting out behaviors (Semanchin et al., 2016). It is also important to consider that support for new foster parents and helping foster parents to feel valued is also essential in creating more favorable outcomes (Taylor & McQuillan, 2014).

In an evaluation of a foster parent training program called KEEP, which is short for keeping foster and kinship parents trained and supported, it was found that there was a significant decrease in child behavior problems for participants of the KEEP program. However, there was not much change in the area of caregiver stress (Greeno et al., 2016). The purpose of this training program is to help caregivers to develop skills that will address child behavioral issues in an effort to increase placement stability. This training is delivered in a sixteen-week

group where caregivers have the opportunity to learn and practice new skills in a supportive environment.

<u>Prevention of Placement Instability</u>

Studies have suggested that predictive risk models that assist caseworkers in identifying children who are the most at risk of experiencing placement instability using characteristics measured at the time of entry into foster care could be helpful in addressing this issue (Fallessen, 2014). Another factor that should be considered in this type of an assessment tool should include social worker experience since this is also associated with less risk of placement disruption (Fallessen, 2014). If this type of a tool is developed, it could assist with ensuring that experienced social workers are assigned cases with children who are most at risk of experiencing placement instability (Fallessen, 2014). Another tool that could be utilized to address this issue is the Parent Daily Report (PDR) Checklist. The PDR checklist is a tool used to measure the occurrence of child behavior issues (Chamberlain et al., 2006). The utilization of this type of a tool would be helpful for social workers as it could help predict placements that are at risk of disrupting and identifying the need for supportive services (Chamberlain et al., 2006).

An important factor that should be considered in the prevention of placement instability is the acknowledgement that when children integrate into their foster care placement, there is a strong indication that this placement will remain stable (Leathers, 2006). Another factor to consider is that it has been found that children have few placement changes when their parents were

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involved in the placement process by preparing their children for new placements and accompanying children during pre-placement visits (Palmer, 1996). Additionally, the children who are placed with foster parents who are highly motivated, involved and nurturing also serves as another protective factor for increasing placement stability (Oosterman et al., 2007).

In summary, the reviewed literature concluded that foster youth face difficulty in all aspects of life when it comes to multiple placement changes. Furthermore, this population faces significant difficulties in their education as opposed to other children in their biological home environment. Multiple placement changes results in the lack of information needed to make sufficient decisions regarding a child's education, a delay or loss of educational records due to placement and school district changes, and lower academic achievements. These issues laid groundwork for this research to develop theory on how to reduce placement changes and improve outcomes for foster youth.

Theoretical Orientation

This study uses systems theory to frame the research topic. According to Friedman & Allen (2011), "systems theory enables us to understand the components and dynamics of client systems in order to interpret problems and develop balanced intervention strategies, with the goal of enhancing the 'goodness of fit' between individuals and their environments," (p. 3).

Systems theory is an appropriate approach in this research project, because positive and negative outcomes for foster youth are influenced by multiple systems. The research considered how a child's education and social skills are impacted by the various systems involved including the child's biological family, the child welfare system, the Juvenile Court system, the school and education system, etc. The researchers recognized that each system may play an important role as a support or barrier to a child. The researchers noted that this research incorporated questions and data gathering techniques that allow questions to be asked that appropriately consider all systems and subsystems involved to gather a more holistic picture of the research focus.

In addition, this theory allowed readers to visualize the effects foster youth have on other systems. Systems theory overlaps the systems that a person is connected with. This research not only demonstrated how placement changes effect a foster youth's systems including education, foster care, etc., but also demonstrated how foster youth contribute back to society and the systems surrounding them whether positive or negative.

Potential Contributions to Micro and Macro Social Work Practice

In a Post Positivist approach, one must ask why this study is important and what contributions will this make to the field of social work? To those questions both micro and macro changes were identified based on the outcomes of this research focus.

This research addressed social workers' perspectives on what creates placement instability for children in the foster care system. These perspectives, as well as ideas, led to proposed changes to the child welfare/foster care system. Within micro social work practice, this research sought to improve and develop methods towards reducing placement changes, and increasing foster agencies' awareness of the implications foster youth face when moved from home to home. With that said, the research impacted the macro level of social work as it relates to the number of placements changes for foster youth. For example, a more suitable policy for the number of placement changes for foster youth was suggested, and a more defined selection process was identified and proposed to better match a child to a foster home with strong compatibility.

Summary

Chapter one addressed the stage of assessment in this research study. The research focused on the effects placement changes have on youth in foster care, the impact on their well-being, and strategies that can be used to prevent an increased number of placement changes. A post positivist paradigm was used and a rationale for this approach was provided. A discussion of previously written, related literature was completed, as was the theoretical framework that was used in this study. Lastly, potential contributions to the field of social work, including micro and macro practice, were presented and discussed as to how

they strengthen social work practice when working with children in the foster care system.

CHAPTER TWO

ENGAGEMENT

Introduction

Chapter two covers keys aspects of this study including the engagement

strategies used to obtain a research site. This chapter explains details of the

research site, as well as how the researchers engaged the gatekeeper and

research participants. Chapter two also depicts the self-preparation used by the

researchers to carry out this study. This chapter addresses issues surrounding

diversity, ethics, and politics. Finally, this chapter explains the role technology

played in the engagement process.

Research Site

The research sites for this study were two county child welfare agencies

serving foster youth in Southern California. The research sites provided the

information needed to perform this research project in a confidential manner

without disclosing personal identifiable information. Both research sites included

staff that work directly with children in the foster care system, and young adults

who have aged out of the foster care system.

The agencies provide direct case management services to the children

and families involved with the agency and the Juvenile Court system. The case

management services include referrals for services, advocacy, and others. The

clients are typically involved with this agency on an involuntary basis; however, voluntary clients are not to be excluded. Both research sites service clients from all backgrounds and socio-economic statuses. The study sites employed research participants; however, each participant was also a part of the researchers' personal networks separate from the study site. Participant demographics include various races, genders, and adults over the age of 18; however, it is noted both sites are primarily staffed by female employees.

Engagement Strategies for Gatekeepers at Research Sites

The researchers identified social workers from each study site and from within their personal networks, and engaged them in a research proposal. The researchers began engagement via email and face-to-face contact introducing social workers to the researchers and the research focus. The researchers requested individual meetings with social workers to explain the research focus, as well as the benefits of the research for the study sites. With their agreement, the researchers engaged social workers at each site by scheduling individual, face-to-face interviews to discuss their perspectives on placement instability and the impacts on the children they serve. The researchers requested that social workers share their experiences including successes and barriers involved in placement stability. It is noted that the researchers explained that the purpose of the research project is to work collectively with the agencies/study sites to identify trends, develop theories, and make thoughtful contributions to social work practice on both micro and macro practice levels as it relates to the

importance of placement stability. The researchers also explained that the goal is to develop theory to stabilize placement changes, and improve outcomes for the clients serviced by their agency.

Self-Preparation

The researchers prepared for the task at hand by completing a literature review to establish a sound knowledge base and strong foundation of what the research focus is. By reviewing relative literature, the researchers were prepared on what research was done, and what further research should be done. This allowed the researchers to be familiar with past and present practices, and their effectiveness. This review also allowed the researchers to visualize what barriers may be present in their research. This gave the researchers an opportunity to develop strategies to overcome barriers, and be more prepared moving forward. For example, the literature review in this study provided information regarding the trends for children in foster care. It was learned that foster youth face significant difficulties in their education as opposed to other children in their biological home environment. The literature review left room for further research on interventions needed to prevent placement changes, and increase overall outcomes for foster youth.

Another effort for self-preparedness was being sensitive to the research participants, and to their needs and level of comfort. Since qualitative data was gathered in this research project, the researchers made efforts to ask and identify

the participants' level of comfort. In this study, the researchers examined social workers' experiences, positive and negative, with the child welfare and foster care systems. This was an uncomfortable conversation with some research participants who have only had negative experiences. It was the researchers' responsibility to be sensitive to research participants, and to accept that they may not feel comfortable answering some questions posed to them.

<div align="center">Diversity Issues</div>

The researchers took into consideration numerous demographics of the research participants. These demographics included age, gender, socio-economic status, culture, and others. The researchers facilitated qualitative face-to-face interviews to gather the data, and utilized sensitivity to participants as described in this chapter's self-preparedness section.

There were several diversity issues considered by the researchers when completing this research study. The first issue was to be cognizant of culture in relation to research participants' experiences. The researchers considered the ethnicity and culture of participants, and understood that each participant had differing opinions on how successes in foster care are defined. The researchers understood how a participant's culture could impact their practice with children, families and foster parents. Other diversity issues included research participants' geographic location, and its relation to having access to supports and resources for the children they work with.

In efforts to empathize and understand research subjects, the researchers spoke openly with the research participants. A conversation was held asking a research subject their perspectives on placement instability and the effects on foster children. By allowing the subject to share their story and outlook on the research topic, the researchers gained a better understanding of the subjects' views on the foster care system. This information allowed the researchers to approach each subject with individuality and sensitivity.

Ethical Issues

This study utilized face-to-face interviews to gather qualitative data, which left room for some ethical issues. The first ethical issue was ensuring confidentiality so the participants' client's identity and information was not breached. Participants were asked to share stories rather than names of clients they had experience working with. The researchers had the client sign a written informed consent indicating that the study was completely voluntary, and that participants could terminate the interview at any time. Participants were also informed that their responses would remain completely anonymous, and data would only be reported in group form. The researchers were careful to clearly explain the research process and purpose to the research participants, while again ensuring that anonymity was upheld. The research subject was informed of the chain of custody regarding their information. The researchers and research advisor were the only persons to have access to data gathered. They were

reassured that the researchers kept all documents in a locked cabinet with the key remaining with the researchers. Information transferred from written documents to electronic documents was encrypted to require a password when the document was opened. This process was also explained to participants.

This study, like any other study, found the researchers having personal opinions and/or biases that could have interfered with the research. It was the researchers' responsibility to acknowledge and recognize those biases before continuing in the research study. Rather than expressing personal feelings, the researchers were able to appropriately report their findings without biases or overreaction to answers from research subjects. Furthermore, the researchers discussed biases and personal opinions with the research advisor to ensure these biases did not interfere with the research.

Political Issues

The subject of unfavorable outcomes for youth in foster care is deeply rooted in politics today. The researchers exercised good care to steer away from only focusing on the negative impacts of the child welfare/foster care system. The researchers' intentions were clearly outlined and presented throughout the study. Participants were also asked what ideas and solutions they had to better improve this highly political issue. The researchers explained the purpose of the study was to help improve outcomes for children in foster care.

The Role of Technology in Engagement

Technology played a crucial role in the engagement process of this study. As previously noted, the researchers were able to communicate and engage gatekeepers and participants via email in regards to the research study. This allowed for scheduling in person meetings with study participants. It also allowed for the researchers to maintain open communication with all individuals involved. In addition, the researchers used recording devices, with the research subjects' permission, to record interviews that were later transcribed into data. Finally, the researchers were able to utilize technology to document and track data obtained during this study.

Summary

Chapter two discussed the engagement phase and key aspects held within. The study site and the gatekeepers were identified herein. This chapter explored engagement strategies used to involve the gatekeepers, as well as the researchers' methods for self-preparedness. This chapter explored issues including diversity, ethics, and politics. Finally, the researchers explained the anticipated benefits and contributions made by the use of technology in this research study.

CHAPTER THREE

IMPLEMENTATION

Introduction

Chapter three addresses the participants involved in the research

proposal and how they were selected to participate in the research study. This

chapter discusses the methods used to gather data, as well as the phases of

data collection. This chapter identifies data recording and analysis methods the

researchers used throughout the study. The chapter discusses how the study

was terminated, and explores the ongoing relationship between the researchers

and the study participants. Finally, the chapter discusses the plan for

dissemination of the study findings, and the methods used to communicate the

findings to the research site and the study participants.

Study Participants

The ideal study participants for this research proposal were child welfare

social workers, and foster youth impacted by placement instability; however,

permission to interview foster youth was not obtained due to strict confidentiality

laws. The researchers then focused on utilizing research participants that had

direct contact, and rich experiences with this population. The participants

included child welfare social workers from two counties throughout Southern

California. These participants all shared similar characteristics in that they all had

contact working directly with foster children and had an understanding of the

child welfare/foster care process. The researchers accessed study participants

that worked with a diverse age range of foster youth including ages zero to

twenty-one years old. The researchers gathered sixteen voluntary participants of

multiple ethnic backgrounds, gender, and socio-economic statuses. It was

important to have a wide variety of research subjects to gather the most accurate

qualitative data. The researchers conducted face-to-face interviews with these

professionals regarding their experiences managing cases with youth in foster

care whom experienced at least one placement change.

Selection of Participants

In efforts to provide accurate data through face-to-face qualitative

interviews, study participants were identified by other study participants. It is

noted that participants were also a part of the researchers' personal networks.

The study participant pool required firsthand experience working with youth in

foster care. Although more experienced workers were desired, newer social

workers were not excluded from this study. Since the researchers used a post-

positivist approach, the selection process of study participants utilized the

snowball sampling method. This method allowed for the researchers to, "utilize

the networks between key people in relation to the study focus," (Morris, 2006,

p.93). This type of sampling allowed the researchers to interview a social worker

from their personal network, and then allowed the participant to identify another

social worker who had experience working with youth in the foster care system.

The researchers implemented this type of sampling by informing participants of

the snowball sampling method, and inviting them to refer others to the study. The

researchers noted that participants were interviewed on a voluntary basis. The

researchers further noted that snowball sampling allowed for a wide range of

experienced participants. This sampling allowed researchers to examination of a

wide range of experiences from Southern California social workers including

diversity in dealing with placement instability and subsequent outcomes.

Data Gathering

Data collection was completed via face-to-face qualitative interviews with

study participants. Data collection began by identifying at least one social worker

from the researchers' personal networks. Using the abovementioned snowball

sampling method, the researchers conducted voluntary interviews with a total of

sixteen child welfare social workers from different counties within Southern

California. This allowed a wide array of experienced professionals to assist in

identifying needs, impact of placement changes, outcomes, barriers to placement

stability, and more for foster youth.

The type of data gathered was qualitative data. Upon permission from

each study participant, data was gathered through audio recorded, in-person

interviews. It is noted that researchers also took written notes throughout the

interviews to assist in data recording and analysis portion of the study. This data included the gathering of words and sentences to analyze and interpret using a post positivism paradigm. It is important to note the importance of engagement used when completing this data gather in face-to-face interviews, as positive engagement led to active participation in data gathering.

The task of gathering data from this site sample could have served as a barrier as the information regarding foster youth is highly confidential; however, participants agreed to redact identifying information of their clients throughout their interview. Confidentiality of foster children is taken very seriously; therefore, the researchers utilized voluntary research subjects to gather data from professionals without breaching confidentiality.

In these interviews, the researchers used the three categories of questions in a Post Positivist approach. The questions asked included descriptive questions (e.g. "Tell me about clients you have worked with who have experienced one or more placement changes?"), structural questions (e.g. "How often are children moved placements while in foster care?"), and contrast questions (e.g. "If you could speak to agency leaders right now, what would you say to them to fix this problem?").

Phases of Data Collection

The phases of data gathering are explained herein. The first stage of data gathering started by identifying a social worker to see if they met criteria with the

study. Once identified, the next phase included outreach to the potential

participant to start building rapport and gain their understanding and interest in

the study. This stage is where engagement was key, because this set the tone

for the next phase of the study. This phase also included an explanation and

discussion with the research participant about the study and the research

process. This allowed participants to decide if they were willing to participate, ask

questions, and sign consent forms. At this point, the benefits and risks were

discussed with the research participants.

The next phase included scheduling and/or facilitating for face-to-face

interviews with participants on an individual basis. During these interviews, the

researchers asked opened-ended questions, while engaging in conversation.

The researchers documented brief notes during interviews and ensured

recording occurred when the participant granted permission. Once finished, the

researchers proceeded with termination of the interview including thanking the

participant and answering any underlying questions. Immediately after the

interviews the researchers completed hand written narratives and notes about

the interview, and reflected these thoughts in a journal. Recordings were later

transcribed and analyzed after all interviews were completed. It is noted that

each researcher interviewed eight participants, and transcribed the

corresponding data.

In these interviews, the researchers ensured proper structure was

maintained including engagement, introduction, interview, termination, and follow

–up. The researchers used the three categories of questions through a post

positivist approach. The questions were asked to all study participants in each interview.

Data Recording

As mentioned in previous phases, the researchers had each participant sign a consent form to permit or decline audio recording the conversations. For participants who allowed audio recordings, an entire transcript was completed from the recording and later analyzed. It was noted that all participants agreed to the audio recording; therefore, an alternate recording process was not needed. Each participant was also informed that short notes would be taken during the interview by the researchers. The researchers completed brief note taking in a journal to process and reflect on ideas after each interview. In these notes, the researchers documented key words and phrases used by study participants in regards to the research focus. The researchers wrote down any thoughts and observations from the interview, and synthesized the journals into what information was pertinent to the research subject. The researchers also reflected on feelings from the interview, and the overall interview experience in order to identify successes and barriers discovered in the interview process. This allowed the researchers time to evaluate the interview and make adjustments as needed. In addition, the researchers were able to identify biases and how they did/did not effect the interview. This process was used to allow the interviewers a place to reflect on their biases to ensure they do not impede in the research process. All

interviews were completed in-person, and followed this process of data recording.

Data Analysis

Using a post-positivist approach, and gathering qualitative data, the researchers proceeded to use a qualitative analysis procedure. The researchers collected and recorded the interviews, as previously mentioned, as words as opposed to numbers used in quantitative research. The researchers used a bottom-up approach, as the researchers proposed a look further into the theory that decreased placement changes have positive effects on the overall outcomes for youth in foster care.

The researchers evaluated the data gathered after all face-to-face interviews were completed, and data transcribed. The researchers then emerged themselves in the transcripts from the data in efforts to identify interesting words, lines, or sentences from a particular segment of an interview. The researchers were able to further micro-analyze some of these segments to identify any concepts from this data. Using microanalyses, the research helped guide the researchers into the process of open coding in order to identify the concepts of placement instability for foster youth as well as, "categories of concepts, properties of concepts, and dimensions of properties," (Morris, 2013, p. 259). This allowed the researchers to identify patterns and group them together into categories. Individually, each researcher followed this process for all of the

sixteen transcribed interviews, and developed tentative categories. The researchers then met together to refine categories and concepts found during their data analysis process.

Together, the researchers used axial coding to develop connections and link commonalities together from concepts discovered in the interview analysis. This allowed the researchers to gain an understanding and explanation of social workers' perspectives on placement instability and the overall impact this has on foster children. Axial coding allowed the researchers to make statements about the associations between categories and their dimensions. The researchers were able to interpret words or statement made by research subjects, and correlate them to why children may experience negative outcomes after placement changes.

Using the categories and dimensions found, the researchers used selective coding to develop theory. The purpose of using selective coding was to give an overall explanation of the data gathered from face-to-face interviews in relation to that found in the literature review. The theory described the negative implications that foster youth experience due to frequent and ongoing placement changes. Lastly, the conditional matrix stage was utilized to determine how the theory and data results relate to various aspects of both micro and macro social work practice and policy.

Termination and Follow Up

After the study was completed, the researchers provided the research findings to the research coordinator and the appropriate bodies for publishing. The researchers terminated the study with all parties involved including participants, gatekeepers and the study site by thanking each person involved for their time and willingness to participate in the study. The researchers also answered any questions and/or concerns from all participants. The participants were provided contact information for the researchers in the event they had questions. They were also provided with information on when and how to access the final graduate studies research project online.

The researchers did not have follow-up with study participants after termination; however, the researchers have a passion for working in child welfare and extend study findings to interested agencies. The researchers used research findings in practice when working with children in the foster care system.

Communication of Findings and Dissemination Plan

The researchers communicated the study findings to both the participants and the study site by informing them of the timeframe for publication of the study through the California State University, San Bernardino Pfau Library. All involved were provided with the ScholarWorks link (http://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu) to access the completed study online upon publication. The researchers also extended invitations to study participants and the gatekeepers of the study site to

attend the "Poster Day" organized by California State University, San Bernardino, Masters in Social Worker Program, where findings will be electronically displayed. If they identified as unable to attend, the researchers communicated their willingness to provide them with a printed copy of the completed, published research project and findings after July 2018.

Summary

Chapter three explored the phases of termination and follow-up. The researchers identified the study participants and identified the selection process. This chapter explained the how data was gathered, recorded and analyzed. In this chapter, the researchers explained the termination and follow-up that was done at the completion of this research project. Finally, this chapter explained how the research findings were communicated and disseminated.

CHAPTER FOUR

EVALUATION

Introduction

Chapter four discusses the evaluation of the data retrieved from sixteen

qualitative interviews conducted with study participants. The data analysis

includes identifying and reporting participant demographics. The common

themes identified within the interviews are outlined and thoroughly discussed in

this chapter.

Data Analysis

Common Themes

The focus of this study was to answer the following questions regarding

the impacts of placement instability on youth in the foster care system: How often

are children being moved from home to home in foster care? How are children

directly affected by placement changes in foster care? And how can we help

reduce placement changes and increase positive outcomes for this already

disadvantaged population? This research explored the child welfare social

workers' perspectives on placement instability and the repercussions faced by

the foster youth they work with. These questions were answered solely from the

perspective of social workers, and several themes emerged in response to these

questions. The themes are listed below, and include negative impacts on education, behaviors and reactions, prevention strategies, intervention strategies, and systemic issues.

Demographics

This study encompassed qualitative data gathered from sixteen child welfare social workers during face-to-face interviews. Fifteen of the sixteen participants were female. Four identified as Caucasian, one identified as Cambodian, one identified as Filipino American, two identified as African American, five identified as Hispanic, and three identified as bi-racial. The participants ranged in age from thirty years old to sixty-five years old. Their experience as child welfare social workers ranged from two years to twenty years.

Impact on Education

The majority of participants explained that placement moves negatively impact a child's in numerous aspects of their life. One theme identified was the negative impact placement instability has on a child's education. When asked what type of impact a placement change has on a foster child's education, one research stated,

> If the child had to switch schools, their education could be impacted
> including their grades, because they have had to miss days of school
> during the transition. They also might have trouble concentrating being in

a new environment. So, I think it has a negative effect on their

education. (Interview #8, personal communication, February 2018)

Another participant explained,

Often times their grades drop, or they get put into classes above or below

their learning level. Also, often times documentation or files get lost in the

shuffle. I think you also see a lot of absences because a child does not

want to go to a new school where they know nobody. They may also have

increased behaviors that impact their ability to learn in the classroom.

(Interview #1, personal communication, February 2018)

Children's Behaviors and Foster Parents' Reactions

When participants were asked how often children are moved placement,

many participants expressed no concise number could be given. Most

participants noted between one (1) to five (5) placement changes per year, and

in extreme cases, over twenty (20) placement changes were made throughout

the life of the case. One participant stated, "I would say children are moved two

to three times, if that. Some are never moved, and some are moved way more

than average," (Interview #4, personal communication, February 2018).

When asked why children are most likely moved from home to home,

participants identified troubling child behaviors as the primary reason. One

participant stated,

Usually it is behavioral issues like behaviors at school or in the

foster home… Sometimes it can be behaviors that are drug related

like smoking marijuana or cigarettes or drinking alcohol, and

sometimes issues like petty theft or property damage or verbal

outburst. (Interview #3, personal communication, February

2018)

A child's behaviors were a constant theme with almost all participants. This participant described and explained the problematic behaviors they had encountered during their career that resulted in placement changes including stealing, running away from the home without permission, acting out at school, and continuous detentions and suspensions from school. Other highlighted behaviors included dishonesty, inappropriate use of a cellular telephone, not doing homework, and school expulsions.

Several participants also noted the behaviors and reactions of the caregivers as part of this theme for reasons why children do not have stable placements. When asked why a youth might be moved, participants reported some caregivers do not like to deal with children when they display any minor behavioral issues. Some participants stated caregivers might be too inexperienced to know that these behaviors are to be expected, whereas, other participants identified caregivers' expectations of normal behaviors to be farfetched and unrealistic.

Another participant explained their frustration with caregivers giving up too easily on children in foster care when typical behaviors arise. They reported experiences where youth displayed behaviors normally expected with puberty, for youth in and out of foster care, and the caregiver overreacted. The exaggeration of typical behaviors was reported to also contribute placement

instability. This participant shared, "These are normal pubescent behaviors found in children that are in, or not in, foster care… It seems that any little bit of rocking the boat calls for a seven-day [removal] notice, or a placement to change," (Interview #3, personal communication, February 2018)

In addition, some participants noted a caregiver's inability or unwillingness to continue providing for a child as reasons why children are moved placements. One participant reported,

> We have placement changes sometimes if, at any age, you determine that the caregiver is not meeting the child's needs or is abusive or neglectful. This includes if a home is not in the condition that are required by the state. Other placement changes can result because of a child's or youth's behaviors that are out of control, and a caregiver refuses to keep the child, or the caregiver is not equipped to meet the child's behavior or emotional needs. (Interview #5, personal communication, February 2018)

Prevention Strategies

Communication. When asked about strategies that are utilized to prevent placement changes, participants gave many examples of techniques that they use directly with clients as well as supportive services that they have referred clients to. Some of the techniques that participants explained that they utilize include frequent contact with caregivers, youth, and service providers. When issues are communicated to social workers, participants stated that they often attempt to process and problem solve these issues with the youth and mediate between the youth and caregiver. This is done in an effort to prevent the situation

from escalating. Participants expressed that supporting the placement by allowing caregivers to vent is another helpful strategy that social workers utilize to help stabilize a placement. One participant stated, "Often times, it's just as simple as letting them vent and listening to them and you know, making them feel like you're hearing them and just supporting them in that way and kind of reminding them about the trauma that these kids have experienced and that it's not necessarily a personal attack upon them," (Interview #14, personal communication, February 2018).

Services. Aside from prevention strategies that are utilized by social workers directly, participants also described supportive services that clients are referred to by social workers. Caregivers are often encouraged by social workers to utilize respite care services and to participate in foster parent support groups and training. Children are often referred to Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs), mentors and/or services that incorporate the use of youth partners. Youth are also referred to mental health services such as individual therapy to address their trauma histories and to learn new coping skills. The incorporation of Pathways to Wellness was also stated to be a helpful service that identifies children's mental health concerns and services needed to address these concerns. Pathways to Wellness is a collaborative effort by child welfare agencies and Behavioral Health Services to provide children and youth in the child welfare system with mental health screenings and services.

Challenges. When discussing prevention strategies, some participants mentioned strategies that are believed to reduce placement changes but may need to be improved. This included ongoing training for caregivers, clarifying the expectations and responsibilities of caregivers, social worker transparency when placing children, placing children in familiar environments and maintaining family connections. One participant stated that there is a need for "foster parents that have knowledge and dedication to work through the difficult times. I also think expectations for foster parents need to be clear from the beginning by the social worker," (Interview #2, personal communication, February 2018). Some participants expressed that more ongoing training is also necessary. One participant stated that,

> The trainings give foster parents more support and guidance on how to deal with children who have been abused or neglected, because their history of trauma usually correlates with their behaviors that lead to the possibility of a placement change. (Interview #5, personal communication, February 2018)

In addition to more in-depth foster parent training, some participants also felt that child welfare agencies should pay foster parents more and set higher expectations to hold foster parents more accountable. Many participants discussed their optimism about the implementation of the new Level of Care system that is a result of the Continuum of Care Reform in California. As one participant explained, "It is like a reward system for all the efforts foster parents

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are doing to meet the needs of our kids," (Interview #5, personal communication, February 2018).

Family Connections. Many participants expressed the need for agencies to increase efforts to ensure that children are connected to their families and relatives. Some social workers discussed the use of Family Finding units and programs that make efforts to place children with relatives in the hopes that these relatives can provider permanency for some children. Aside from placement, participants discussed that children who are disconnected from their families become anxious. At times, this separation can be due to logistical issues as it can be difficult to arrange visits between children and their families when they are moved to a foster home that is a far distance from where a child's family resides. As one participant explained,

> I think that the ability to arrange and maintain ongoing and consistent visitation with their families, with their parents, with their siblings, I honestly think that could go a long ways towards reducing a lot of the behavioral stuff that's happening. (Interview #14, personal communication, February 2018)

Another participant stated:

> I think that if there are relatives or parents' relatives, extended family members, I don't think they're involved as much in placement or supporting that placement and getting them involved as much as possible because I think any connections to family has always been a huge issue with youth. So, the more we can have family involved with visits or

providing activities, or just being able to get to the placement would

provide the youth with some kind of stability while they're working on their

own issues to then be able to return back to the family. (Interview #12,

personal communication, February 2018)

Ideas for Improvements. Many participants suggested ideas for what could

happen next to improve prevention strategies that are being utilized. One of the

suggestions that was shared by several participants was the need for agencies to

improve foster parent recruitment and retention efforts. It was stated that, "We

need much more recruitment of foster parents who are willing to handle some of

the tougher kids," (Interview #12, personal communication, February 2018).

Some participants felt that there should be a better vetting process for committed

caregivers. When discussing ideas for how to improve the issue of multiple

placement changes, one participant stated the following:

We need to look deeper into what's causing these placement changes and

what motivates these caregivers to want to hold onto a youth, and not just

money. It's got to be more than just compensation. There's more to it.

There's like a human level to it that needs to be explored. (Interview #11,

personal communication, February 2018)

Another participant noted that more incentives in the form of services for

foster parents and extracurricular activities for children could be provided by the

agency to help retain foster parents.

Interventions

Participants discussed the interventions they use to prevent placement changes. Many use wraparound services, foster family agencies, mental health services, and agency based meetings. Wraparound services are an in-home supportive service for youth and caregivers that is often used to stabilize placements. Foster family agencies are agencies that provide treatment level foster homes and supportive services for youth and caregivers. Mental health services include county and community based agencies that provide therapeutic services and resources to clients. Agency based meetings include collaborative meetings that are typically facilitated by a county child welfare social worker and often include child welfare staff, youth, families, caregivers and service providers. Participants explained that services are helpful as they provide the caregiver and youth with extra support, since service providers are often more available to the family than social workers. Some of the direct intervention services that social workers use when placements become unstable include: wraparound services and Therapeutic Behavioral Services (TBS). TBS is a behavioral coaching program for youth who are experiencing behavioral and/or emotional challenges. Agency based meetings include Child and Family Team (CFT) meetings. CFT meetings are meetings that are facilitated by county child welfare social workers and include all formal and informal supports of the youth and family. The purpose of the CFT is to engage in a shared decision making progress. Mental health services include those that are offered through mental health departments.

Meetings such as CFT meetings were often discussed as a way for social workers to have open, honest communication with the youth, caregivers and

service providers, as well as to include the child's voice in the placement

decisions. Participants explained that CFT meetings are a way to bring everyone

together to brainstorm ideas in the hopes of coming to a resolution with the team

that will have the least impact to the child. As one participant stated:

So at those meetings, those are a chance for everybody in the kid's life,

professionals, connections, supports, family, the child, to sit down and try

to figure out what we can do to maintain them where they're at if that's

what everybody's kind of working towards, talk about the concerns and

how we can alleviate them and hopefully come to some sort of a

resolution to where the kid doesn't have to move. (Interview #16, personal

communication, February 2018)

Participants expressed that they felt that formal services such as

wraparound and TBS are helpful interventions as they provide the foster parent

and child with additional support needed to stabilize a placement that is at risk of

being disrupted. In-home services were discussed by participants as an

intervention that is convenient to foster parents and provides them with the tools

needed to appropriately respond to a child's behaviors. Participants explained

that having partners or mentors such as youth mentors and parent partners can

improve outcomes for caregivers and youth. Another participant explained,

I think they're helpful because a social worker is not always available to be

in the home working with the foster parent and the child when issues do

arise. So there's that extra support where they can come into the home

more intensely during the week and put some more behavioral strategies

in place, therapeutic interventions. (Interview #9, personal communication, February 2018)

Some participants discussed challenges and barriers to using these interventions to prevent placement changes, such as a lack of motivation from the caregiver and/or child to participate in services and the issue of services being a temporary fix to some of the issues that arise. Many participants expressed that there are times when they feel that there is nothing that can be done to prevent a placement change because a caregiver is completely unwilling to allow a youth to remain in their home. When asked if interventions and services work to decrease placement changes, one participant stated the following:

For the most part, I think these interventions work but there are always going to be cases where no intervention can prevent a placement change, especially when the caregiver has their mind made up and is adamant about moving the child from their home. (Interview #1, personal communication, February 2018)

Another participant stated sometimes caregivers may be willing to try an intervention to address behavior issues with a child; however, some caregivers don't always have the patience to endure through some of the challenges they're faced with. This participant stated for this reason, interventions at times have been a "temporary fix until the next issue came up or if this issue came up again," (Interview #11, personal communication, February 2018). Other participants

stated that there are often times when the youth is the one who is unwilling or unmotivated to participate in services to stabilize a placement. As stated by one participant, "I think that if they are open to letting it work, it will work but I think that some of our kids are just in such a bad place that they're not ready to accept the help," (Interview #15, personal communication, February 2018).

Placement Stability Barriers within the Child Welfare System

Through interviews with participants, several systemic barriers were identified that negatively impact placement changes. Participants were asked what they would say to agency leaders to help improve the research focus, and several participants offered ideas to assist in creating placement stability for foster youth including: improved internal communication, increased social worker training and knowledge, more placement homes, and more financial compensation for caregivers. One research stated,

> Educating social workers to be in constant communication with the caregivers for the benefit of the child. They also need to make sure social workers are disclosing all the information about the child, so that the foster parent can make an informed decision when they are excepting a placement. (Interview #8, personal communication, February 2018)

Another participant added, "Educating social workers on different resources, and putting more funding into those resources," (Interview #9, personal communication, February 2018).

Several participants reported feeling that caregivers should be compensated more. One participant stated, "I've always been of the opinion that

we should pay foster parents more and expect more and hold them accountable

for more…," (Interview #14, personal communication, February 2018). Another

participant shared, "Honestly, I think all of our leaders already know what the

problems are and the most obvious answer is funding and staffing…," (Interview

#13, personal communication, February 2018). Lastly, participants recognized

that an increase in the number of foster homes would be beneficial by providing

more options for youth in foster care. One participant stated, "I would tell them

that we need more help with placements. We need more placements," (Interview

#2, personal communication, February 2018).

Summary

This chapter discussed the data collected from sixteen participants from

the study sites. The participants' demographics were presented including

ethnicity, gender, age, and years of experience with child welfare. The data

retrieved from the qualitative interview identified the themes that were discussed

in this chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Introduction

This chapter discusses the researchers' analysis and interpretation of the data gathered. The research findings are presented in comparison to previous research regarding the effects placement changes have on children in foster care. The limitations of the study are also discussed in this chapter. Lastly, the implications of these findings for micro and macro social work practice are explored.

Discussion

Overall, participants identified behavioral issues as one of the most prevalent themes for frequent placement changes for youth in foster care. A previous study found that children who display aggressive and/or dangerous behaviors are also likely to experience placement instability (Newton et al., 2000). Participants shared these same concerns regarding the behaviors of foster children including substance use, theft, running away and property destruction. The consensus among participants is that increased problematic/violent behaviors by a foster child result in an increase of placement changes. In return, the more a child's placement is changed, the more likely a

child is to experience behavioral problems, thus creating a vicious cyclical. This finding was expected, as previous research suggested that placement instability might be a factor that increases the risk of foster youth to display problematic behaviors (Stott, 2012).

Participants also identified a caregiver's reaction to a child's behaviors as a theme for placement instability. This included social workers' perception that caregiver's give up too easily on a child when they experience "normal," age-appropriate behaviors. A caregiver's inability or unwillingness to continue providing care for a child is a contributing factor to placement instability. It has been found that placement stability is enhanced when foster parents are able to address problem behaviors, and there is a "goodness of fit" between children and foster parents (Semanchin et al., 2016, p. 255). This study, and our participants, identified a need for more prepared and informed caregivers in order to increase placement stability. This study did not include research on caregivers' level of preparedness when accepting foster children into their home; however, findings are clear that better prepared caregivers are more likely to respond appropriately to a child's problematic behaviors and maintain the child in their home.

Participants largely correlated placement changes with negative implications on a child's education. Foster youth are already at a disadvantage by having to be removed from their school of origin. Participants reported experiences where foster children were placed in wrong grade levels and had almost failing grades. This was consistent with the literature, as Watson & Kebler

(2012) noted that foster children are more likely to have increased discipline records, be placed in special education, and have lower academic success. Although this theme was consistent with previous literature, our study did not explore social worker's perspectives on what factors assist foster youth in being successful in their education. Watson & Kebler (2012) found that multi-system collaboration was key in achieving better educational outcomes for foster youth. Further research with participants is necessary to align with those findings.

In regards to prevention strategies, there were some identified factors that were found to be consistent with the literature. This includes addressing the behavioral issues of youth through special training for caregivers and mental health interventions (James et al., 2004). Participants identified foster parent training as a prevention strategy that they attempt to use. However, it was also noted that ongoing foster parent training to provide more support and guidance is a strategy that needs to be improved. In addition to caregivers acquiring the skills and knowledge to handle behavioral issues, participants also expressed the importance of foster parents' commitment to work through these issues. Participants suggested that to address this issue, foster parent recruitment and retention efforts need to be improved. This is somewhat consistent with what the literature states. The literature acknowledges that foster parents who are able to commit to children during acting out behaviors contributes to successful placements for youth (Semanchin et al., 2016). However, the literature did not

specifically state that this issue should be addressed through agency recruitment and retention practices.

Participants also felt that social workers should be more transparent with foster parents when they are placing children. This is also consistent with what the literature states regarding foster parents feeling unprepared to meet the needs of the children in their care (Semanchin et al., 2016). Another identified prevention effort that social workers can improve upon in practice includes maintaining youth's family connections. The literature states that children who are placed with relatives are less likely to experience multiple placement disruptions (Chamberlain et al., 2006). Additionally, the literature indicates that parental involvement in the placement process can be beneficial in preparing children for new placements (Palmer, 1996).

Other prevention strategies that were not specifically mentioned by participants but were not addressed in the literature that was reviewed by the researchers includes the use of mentors or youth partners, the use of respite care by foster parents, placing children in familiar environments, clarifying caregiver expectations and responsibilities, and increasing foster parent financial compensation. However, it can be inferred that that there is a correlation between some of the factors that contribute to the success of some prevention strategies. For examples, mentors and youth partners are incorporated in some mental health interventions programs.

When discussing intervention strategies, many participants discussed the importance of conducting Child and Family Team meetings and referring youth and caregivers to formal services to address concerns. The literature states that foster parent involvement is crucial in improving outcomes for foster youth (Semanchin et al., 2016). Inviting foster parents to Child and Family Team meetings and involving foster parents in wraparound services are examples of prevention strategies that social workers are utilizing to stabilize placements and improve outcomes for foster youth. The literature also describes programs that are designed to address behavioral issues while providing foster parents with training and support such as the KEEP program (Greeno et al., 2016) and Kinderhaus (Allen & Vacca, 2010). Participants reinforced this idea when discussing the success they have had with referring youth and caregivers to wraparound services.

The researchers did not review literature that addressed some of the challenges and barriers regarding the implementation of intervention strategies that participants mentioned. One of the identified challenges to intervention strategies included a lack of motivation from some foster parents and youth to participate in services intended to stabilize placements. It was also noted that even when foster parents and/or youth participated in these services, this has been viewed as only a temporary fix until the next problem arises.

Limitations

There are some limitations of this study that need to be taken into consideration. The data collected in this study was limited to the perspectives of social workers who work in child welfare agencies in Southern California only. Therefore, one of the limitations of this study is that the results of this study may not apply to communities outside of the area that was studied. Additionally, the sample size was limited and did not include various perspectives. All participants were child welfare social workers. This study did not include the perspectives of foster youth or foster parents who could have provided additional insightful information. Therefore, this lack of variety amongst participants limited the results of this study.

Recommendations for Social Work Practice, Policy and Research

This research provides insight as to what social workers identify as reasons for placement instability and the implications for youth in foster care. The results of this study can provide valuable insight for child welfare staff who directly service youth in foster care and their foster parents. The results can also offer child welfare staff knowledge about placement instability to utilize when implementing social work practice, developing policy and exploring further research.

Social Work Practice

Based upon this study, the most important recommendation to child welfare staff is the importance of utilizing effective and honest communication skills when working with foster youth and foster parents. Many caregivers are underprepared to manage a foster child's behaviors that might be a result for their past traumatic experiences. Increased and effective communication with caregivers regards a child's strengths, behaviors, and needs is crucial to increasing placement stability. If a child's behavioral issues are clearly communicated to foster parents beforehand, they will be able to assess the goodness of fit, and make informed decisions about accepting placement of a child. Honest communication can prevent an unnecessary change in placement for a foster child, thus increasing the likelihood for positive outcomes.

A recommendation from this study for macro social work practice is the importance of foster parent recruitment efforts. Agencies should practice ongoing efforts to inform communities of the need for foster parents, as well as, informing potential caregivers of the realities for fostering abused and neglected children. These efforts should include attempts to obtain specialized foster homes that can meet the needs of marginalized populations in child welfare including Native Americans and LGBTQ youth. Better outreach efforts could impact the quantity and quality of foster parents in a positive manner.

Child Welfare Policy

It was noted by several participants that foster parents are not properly trained to manage aggressive and risk-taking behaviors. It would be beneficial for

child welfare agencies to mandate foster parents to participate in ongoing training regarding children of all age groups. It would also benefit foster parents to attend educational or informational sessions about the intervention services offered to them. In addition, California child welfare policy currently requires social workers to make only one in-person visit per month with foster children and their foster parents. This study found that increased communication, including more frequent face-to-face contact with children and caregivers can assist in mitigating concerns before they escalate to a placement change. Modifying policy may positively impact the crisis of placement instability.

<u>Social Work Research</u>

Further research with children and foster parents regarding reasons for placement instability is needed to illicit a better understanding as to why foster care placements are frequently unstable. Interviewing a more comprehensive sample of participants may serve as beneficial to understanding the barriers children and foster parents face on a day-to-day basis. When conducting future research, it is important that participants from outside of Southern California are included.

In addition, further research into a child's history of adverse childhood experiences (ACES) is needed to allow child welfare staff insight as to possible adversity/trauma a child has endured to determine if these are reasons for a child's behavioral issues. It is important to know the background information of a child to assess their needs. Research on adverse childhood experiences is

continuing to develop; however, research on ACES and placement instability is limited.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study identified the various factors that should be considered when assessing placement changes and the impact on youth in foster care. Some of these factors included the impact on youth's education, children's behaviors and foster parents' reactions, prevention and intervention strategies, and systemic issues. This study also explained some of the challenges and barriers that social workers face when attempting to reduce the number of placement changes that children in foster care experience and ensure that youth are placed in supportive placements. The researchers are hopeful that the information provided in this study can positively influence current practice which can assist with supporting the efforts of child welfare agencies to provide youth in foster care with safety, permanency and well-being.

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

DEMOGRAPHICS-

Name (not required):

Age:

Gender:

Ethnicity:

Current Employer:

Current Job Title:

A. Social Worker Interview:

    a. What is your experience working with foster youth?

    b. Tell me about clients you have worked with who have

       experienced one or more placement change.

        i. Why were they moved?

        ii. In your experience, how often are children moved

          placements?

    c. What kind of intervention did you use to prevent the

       placement change?

        i. Did the intervention(s) work?

        ii. Why do you think it did/didn't work?

    d. What suggestions do you have to change this problem?

        i. Are there adequate intervention tools?

   ii. Are there services available for caregivers and/or

     children?

 e. In cases where there was at least one placement change,

  how was the client's education effected?

   i. Did the change effect any other areas of the client's

    life?

 f. If you could speak to agency leaders right now, what would

  you say to them to fix this problem?

 g. Who else can I speak to about this topic?

Developed by Steven Joseph Delgado and Amanda Marie Fuerte

APPENDIX B

INFORMED CONSENT

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences
School of Social Work

INFORMED CONSENT

The study in which you are asked to participate is designed to investigate placement changes and the effects on education for foster youth in Southern California. The study is being conducted by myself, Steven Delgado, student, and Assistant Professor, Deirdre Lanesskog, School of Social Work, California State University, San Bernardino. The study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board Social Work Sub-committee, California State University, San Bernardino.

PURPOSE: The purpose of the study is to investigate placement changes and the effects on education for foster youth in Southern California.

DESCRIPTION: Participants will be asked of a few questions on their experience in foster care, professional relationship to foster children, educational achievements, number of placement changes, reasons for placement changes, and some demographics.

PARTICIPATION: Your participation in the study is totally voluntary. You can refuse to participate in the study or discontinue your participation at any time without any consequences.

CONFIDENTIALITY OR ANONYMITY: Your responses will remain anonymous and data will be reported in group form only.

DURATION: It will take approximately 30 minutes to complete the interview.

RISKS: There are no foreseeable risks to the participants.

BENEFITS: There will not be any direct benefits to the participants.

CONTACT: If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Assistant Professor, Dr. Deirdre Lanesskog at 909-537-7222.

RESULTS: Please contact the Scholarworks database (http://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu) at the Pfau Library, California State University San Bernardino for the results of the study after September 2018.

This is to certify that I read the above and I am 18 years or older.

_____   _____
Place an X mark here   Date

I agree to be tape recorded: _____Yes   _____No

909.537.5501 · 909.537.7029
5500 UNIVERSITY PARKWAY, SAN BERNARDINO, CA 92407-2393

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APPENDIX C

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SAN BERNARDINO
SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK
Institutional Review Board Sub-Committee

Researcher(s): Steven Delgado & Amanda Fuerte

Proposal Title: Preventing placement changes and increasing educational outcomes for foster youth

_SW1742_____

Your proposal has been reviewed by the School of Social Work Sub-Committee of the Institutional Review Board. The decisions and advice of those faculty are given below.

Proposal is:

__X___   approved

_____   to be resubmitted with revisions listed below

_____   to be forwarded to the campus IRB for review

Revisions that must be made before proposal can be approved:

_____   Investigators' signature missing

_____   missing informed consent _____ debriefing statement

_____   revisions needed in informed consent _____ debriefing

_____   data collection instruments revision

_____   agency approval letter missing

_____   CITI missing

_____   revisions in design needed (specified below)

_____   1/20/2017
Committee Chair Signature   Date

Distribution: White-Coordinator; Yellow-Supervisor; Pink-Student

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ASSIGNED RESPONSIBILITIES

This was a two-person project where authors collaborated throughout. For each phase of the project, both authors' responsibilities were assigned as listed below.

1. Data Collection:

   Team Effort: Steven Delgado and Amanda Fuerte

2. Data Entry and Analysis:

   Team Effort: Steven Delgado and Amanda Fuerte

3. Writing Report and Presentation of Findings:

   a. Introduction and Literature:

      Team Effort: Steven Delgado and Amanda Fuerte

   b. Methods:

      Team Effort: Steven Delgado and Amanda Fuerte

   c. Results:

      Team Effort: Steven Delgado and Amanda Fuerte

   d. Discussion:

      Team Effort: Steven Delgado and Amanda Fuerte