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## PARENT PARTNERS' PERCEPTIONS OF REUNIFICATION CELEBRATION AND THE IMPACT ON REUNIFIED PARENTS

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AND THE IMPACT ON REUNIFIED PARENTS

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A Project  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State University,  
San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Social Work

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by  
Tre'Nise JeMel Anderson  
Marley Leila Walker

June 2019

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## ABSTRACT

In the study, the researchers explored parent partners' perceptions on reunification celebration events and the impact the event has on fostering reunified parents' use of positive parenting skills. A qualitative design was completed using convenience sampling. The researchers studied previous research that focused on the reunification process and the general importance of celebrations in child welfare as a precursor to their study. The researchers conducted face-to-face interviews with nine parent partners from one child welfare agency in Southern California. Our findings revealed four major themes of the study. First, we learned of the importance of recognizing reunified parents' for their successful family reunification efforts. Second, we learned of the participants' perceptions of reunified parents being nominated and or honored. Third, we found the participants selection criteria for nominating reunified parents' for the event and their perceptions of the reunified parents' parental growth. Finally, we learned of the participants suggestions for future reunification celebration events. The researchers discussed limitations found in this study such as a small sample size of nine participants. Another limitation included the study's focus on the parent partners' perception of the event; and lacked the perspective of reunified parents' who were honored at the reunification celebration. Lastly, the researchers provided recommendations for social work practice and research including increased social worker involvement in the reunification celebration and adoption of this event in other child welfare

agencies. The researchers recommend that further research be conducted to obtain insight from the perspective of reunified parents' who were honored at this event.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### Problem Statement

When a child is removed from the care of his or her birth parents there are an immense amount of emotions, thoughts, and concerns experienced by both the child and the parents, but the goal is for the family to reunify whenever possible. Family reunification is an important part of child welfare and it is especially important to both the children and their parents. In fact, the primary permanency plan for families who had removed children is family reunification (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013). It is important to understand how potentially traumatizing the removal experience can be on both the child and the parents. For example, parents may experience shame and guilt and even struggle with their self-esteem and their perception of themselves as a parent, all of which can take a toll on the reunification process. Children may experience some resentment and anger toward their parents. While there were services such as family therapy to be utilized as part of the family reunification process there should be some sort of positive reinforcement, such as a reunification celebration, once services were completed and family reunification happens.

Collaboration between several entities in child welfare is essential to the success in family reunification cases. Ankersmit (2016) discussed how important it is to collaborate with the foster caregivers and the parents to aid in the successful reunification of the family. The study found that successful

collaboration between these two parties and the agency is vital to the family reunification process, but little research has been conducted once the family is reunited. Child welfare agencies' missions are to preserve and strengthen families, otherwise known as family reunification, through collaboration with parents, foster parents, and other agencies. Child welfare agencies' are constantly looking for new ways to motivate and encourage change to better serve clients and the families, such as, knowing the risks and benefits of having a celebration event for families who have successfully reunified.

### Practice Context

One would expect the social workers in child welfare agencies to celebrate and positively reinforce the successes made by the families they work with. During the family reunification process collaboration between foster caregivers, parents, and the agency can be crucial to the success of parenting once the child returns home, because the parent will have learned and built a support system to be used continuously after reunification. Earlier research found that birth parents struggled with feeling they lacked social, emotional, and financial support upon reunifying with their child or children (Malet et al., 2010). So, it is important to understand the process of family reunification and post reunification so that child welfare social workers can provide the additional support and aftercare services the family may need.

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to examine parent partners' perceptions on the usefulness of the reunification celebration event and whether the event fosters the reunified parents' use of positive parenting skills. The upper management team at the study agency selected the topic of a reunification celebration as a significant topic to be explored more in depth. According to the agency's parent partner supervisor, the parent partner unit has organized and hosted a reunification celebration event for the last two years. The reunification celebration event is an annual group event that celebrates reunified families who successfully completed a family reunification case. Social workers and parent partners nominated reunified families from the several regions within the agency for the event. The top five families from each of these regions were selected by the event's committee and they were honored at the event. In order to be nominated for the event, a reunified family must have a closed case for a minimum of six months and the family has to have no new substantiated referrals since their case closed.

For the last two years, the event had been held in April and had celebrated over 40 reunified families within the several regions in the agency. Each year the selected families were invited to celebrate in a group setting. At the celebration, the selected families were provided a meal, a crafting activity for the children, a family photo, a gift card, certificate, and a home good (i.e. house plant) for the family. In addition, the selected families were given recognition from

the agency for their success and were given the opportunity to share about their journey in the child welfare system.

Although the event has only been implemented in the agency for the last two years, the parent partner supervisor shared that Santa Clara County, Los Angeles County, Arizona, and New Jersey had annually hosted a celebration in honor of families who achieved family reunification. Therefore, based on the fairly new implementation of the event, the agency and the researchers are interested in learning the usefulness of a reunification celebration event and how it impacts reunified parents use of positive parenting skills in the post reunification stage. Also, the study will explore what other services, resources, and supports could be offered to parents after achieving family reunification. Overall, the findings of the study will be useful for the agency, in better understanding the importance of celebrating family reunification efforts.

The research design that best addresses the topic of a reunification celebration is a qualitative research design. A qualitative research design focuses on data collection that involved words, descriptions, personal stories/experiences and images instead of numbers or statistics (Grinnell & Unrau, 2014). Due to the reunification celebration event being a fairly new concept, there is little to no statistical data and research on the topic in child welfare research. Since the design of the study is qualitative, there will not be an independent or dependent variable. Therefore, the data source that will be utilized is face to face interviews with parent partners employed by the agency.

The participants for the study will be agency employed parent partners who run the event, but who were also former child welfare clients. Parent partners act as mentors for parents who have child welfare involved such as court mandated family reunification. The qualitative design will focus on a small sample size of nine parent partners because there are only nine parent partners currently employed in the agency.

### Significance of the Project for Social Work

Although there has been a lack of research done on this topic, the findings of the study will have an impact on social work practice at the micro and macro level. In terms of social work practice with individuals, the hope of the study is to explore the usefulness of the reunification celebration event for reunified parents once they successfully completed family reunification. Unfortunately, little research has been done on the benefits of celebrating the family once they reunify and had completed or terminated services. It is important to explore this time period further to better understand the reunification process and the use of services post reunification such as positive parenting skills. This study's findings may change social work in child welfare agencies by giving child services workers a better understanding of aftercare services to better serve the clients and their families post reunification. The aim of the project is to explore the parent partners' perception of the reunification celebration event and the impact it has on fostering reunified parents' positive parenting skills.

In terms of social work practice at the agency level, the findings from this study will explore useful ways in which child welfare organizations can implement a reunification celebration event within their agency. Additionally, the study could help child welfare agencies decide on a celebration model or program that will benefit clients in the post family reunification stage. Thus, it is hoped that the findings will assist the agency in better understanding the reunified parents' needs once their family reunification case is closed.

In terms of social work research, this project will contribute to the lack of literature done on the usefulness of the reunification celebration in the child welfare system. In fact, the aim of the project is to explore the concept of the reunification celebration has a useful service for reunified parents. The findings from the study should provide further contexts to reunification celebration practices in child welfare and help foster further research on this topic.

Furthermore, in terms of social work methods and child welfare practice, the implementation of the reunification celebration event is significant in helping child welfare professionals in the follow-up stage of the family reunification case. The study topic will affect the follow-up stage in the generalist practice because it will assist the social worker in providing appropriate and needed after services, resources, and supports to parents who have completed their services and have a closed case with the child welfare agency.

Lastly, the research question for the project is: What are parent partners' perceptions of the reunification celebration event and its impact on reunified parents such as fostering positive parenting skills?

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Introduction

The literature review will focus on the reunification process and the general importance of celebrating in child welfare. The components of the family reunification process included in the review are the implications to family reunification process, collaborative relationships and services/resources and supports. Lastly, the review will examine systems theory, empowerment theory, and Maslow's hierarchy of needs as related to the reunification celebration.

#### Family Reunification Process

Family reunification is the overall permanency goal for a majority of children who are placed in out-of-home care (Carnochan, Lee, & Austin, 2013). The purpose of family reunification is to return children placed in out-of-home care to their biological family (Carnochan et al., 2013). Alpert and Britner (2009) explained that children removed from their parents' care were due to child maltreatment such as abuse and neglect. In order for a child to return home, the parents or caregivers must show the agency and the court system that they can provide sufficient present and future safety for the child in their care (Shaw, 2010). Fernandez and Lee (2013) suggested that the prevalence of children reunified with their parents were approximately 52% of the children who were placed in out-of-home care. When children were removed, they were placed in

out-of-home care such as foster care, kinship or adoption placements (Carnochan et al., 2013).

### Implication of Family Reunification

According to Fernandez and Lee (2013), there is insufficient data on the outcome of family reunification. However, the researchers argued that the time period after family reunification is a significant period to identify potential danger and harm to the child. A risk or safety assessment should be conducted during this time as an additional measure to support the family and to assist them in maintaining their safety goals. Hence, post family reunification can be a difficult time for some families due to a loss of connection, family identity and the transition from out of care back into the home (Fernandez & Lee, 2013). In an assortment of reunification cases, the child and the parent may experience some challenges reconnecting after the child's removal and then return to the home. The difficulty to readjust to the family may result in the child's future attachment, emotional and behavioral problems. Research suggested that it is not uncommon for reentry to out-of-home care after a family reunified (Barth, Weigensberg, Fisher, Fetrow, & Green, 2008). Therefore, there is a need for post family reunification services and supports for reunified families such as after-care services, safety assessments and extended support networks (Fernandez & Lee, 2013).

Research has been done in Australia regarding the reunification aftercare services from the birth parents' perspective. The findings suggested that upon

reunification, birth parents had faced emotional and financial struggles (Malet et al., 2010). Malet et al. (2010) studied birth parents after reunifying with their children and found that parents needed continual support from social services after their children returned home from foster care. Additionally, the child removal can cause attachment disorders and behavioral problems that the foster caregivers will have to deal with. However, upon returning home from foster care the child may experience similar behavioral and emotional issues in combination with some hard feelings toward the birth parents. The parents may also have struggled with some personal guilt or shame due to the removal of their children (Malet et al., 2010). Moreover, considering that a great deal of research that has been done on the reunification process, there has been insufficient studies done on post family reunification outcomes and the usefulness of celebrating reunified parents.

A few studies have been conducted on the likelihood of family reunification based on the length of time in foster care. According to Lopez et al. (2013), about 19% of children returned to their biological parents after a year of being removed and 61% of children returned home 6 months after being removed. The percentage of family reunification based on the length of time removed from the family varied differently globally. For example, this study also found that about 52% of children removed in the United States were returned to the care of their parents and in Spain about 35% of children returned to their family. Furthermore, children who were in emergency and short-term care placements were returned

home at a higher rate than most out-of-home placements. About 90% of children in foster care for over 24 months were not likely to return home to their biological family (Lopez et al., 2013).

Lopez et al. (2013) found at least seven factors that contributed to either the success or failure of family reunification. Those factors included age, kinship care with family cooperation, drug dependence in parents, neglect due to alcoholism, voluntary foster care with visits, short-term foster care with family cooperation, and parental impossibility due to imprisonment (Lopez et al., 2013). Of those seven factors only three showed strong connections to the likelihood of reunification which were kinship care with family cooperation, voluntary foster care with visits, and short-term foster care with family cooperation. On the other hand, the factors drug dependence in parents and neglect due to alcoholism or mental illness had a correlation with a decreased likelihood of reunification. While parental impossibility due to imprisonment had no significant prediction of reunification. However, the age factor could depend on younger or older children and the amount of time left in care. They found that the more advanced in age a child were the less likely they were to reunify with their family of origin (Lopez et al., 2013).

Furthermore, Lopez et al. (2013) acknowledged that there needs to be additional research done on the influence of parental attitude towards possible reunification, the children and biological parent's relationship after reunification, and the child's perspective of the process. Lopez et al. (2013) discussed that

parents of children who were in the care of their extended or kinship family members were more reluctant to participate in the reunification process because they reacted differently to the situation than parents of children who were in non-relative caregiver homes. The main conclusion found was that the reunification process was more successful with the support of extended family members (Lopez, 2013). So, the agency, the foster caregivers, and the extended family were vital to the reunification process (Lopez et al., 2013; Ankersmit, 2016). However, there were no studies done on how a reunification celebration can be beneficial to the parent-child readjustment to post reunification care.

#### Collaboration and the Family Reunification Process

Turnell and Edwards (1999) noted that the worker-parent partnership was an essential component to the family reunification process. Ankersmit (2016) discussed the importance of collaborative partnership between the foster caregivers, the biological parents, and the agency. Collaboration between these three entities is especially important in the reunification process, because each entity played a pivotal role in the reunification of the child and the parent(s). Then, Ankersmit (2016) studied the effects of collaboration between the foster caregivers and the biological parents from the social worker's perspective. In the collaborative relationship, the social worker served as a mediator between the caregivers and the parents and they found that some partnerships between parents and caregivers were beneficial and others felt the opposite (Ankersmit, 2016).

Alpert and Britner (2009) reported that about 50% of children in foster care has a goal of family reunification. This meant child welfare workers were collaborating with the “parents, foster parents, service providers and children” in order to return the child to a safe home (p. 135). Ankersmit (2016) found that the foster caregivers or parents were more inclined to collaborate when four key concepts were accessible to them. The first of the matter was trust; if both foster caregivers and parents had trust in the system otherwise known as the child protection agency than they were more likely to be involved in collaborating with the other party (Ankersmit, 2016). Birth parents had low levels of trust in the system and were perceived by the social workers as not confident in the process. While foster caregivers were viewed as skeptical of the biological parents and feared for the child based off of the impact the maltreatment had on the child (Ankersmit, 2016). The second concept was motivation and willingness; both parties needed to have a willingness to participate in the collaboration process (Ankersmit, 2016). He found that when social workers included the caregivers and the parents in the team decision making process, it helped to build trust between the parents/caregivers and the agency. Then it led to the motivation and willingness to participate in the collaborative process in order to reunify.

Ankersmit (2016) also found that when the parents and caregivers had knowledge about the system and the family reunification process they were more willing to work together and collaborate on the family reunification goal. The last key factor in Ankersmit’s (2016) study, were an agreement to collaborate for

restoration. Foster caregivers and parents both needed to agree on the goal of restoration, in other words reunification, for this collaborative relationship to work (Ankersmit, 2016). Though, collaboration between the agency, the parents, and the foster caregivers is a critical piece to the family reunification process, this study neglected to explore the effects of collaboration post family reunification services. For example, was the foster caregiver able to celebrate with the parent and child for reunifying or was there even a reunification celebration to be had?

#### Services and Extend Support related to the Family Reunification Process

Parents are given services, resources and support to assist in the family reunification process (Carnochan et al., 2013). Carnochan et al. (2013) suggested that the efficacy of these services/resources given to the parents may not be suitable for the parents and their needs. However, there may be some services and supports that could be beneficial to the parents in the family reunification process; such as, Intensive Reunification Program [IRP], wraparound services, and partner parents (Carnochan et al., 2013; Polinsky et al., 2013). IRP services involved the parent and child placed in an environment where they can model and practice positive behavior and new skills in a 36-week program. The social worker and supportive worker were involved in the process to offer and model appropriate behaviors, skills, education and needed supports and resources (Carnochan et al., 2013). In addition, Polinsky et al. (2013) identified wraparound services as a team collaboration that often times included parent partners. Parent partners were parents who experienced success in the

wraparound program and child welfare system (Polinsky et al., 2013). Parent partners were seen as mentors who supported the service recipients in advocating and achieving success in the wraparound program and child welfare system. However, there were insufficient research done on parent partners to know their efficacy in the reunification celebration process.

Even though there is no research available or done on the reunification celebration and positive parenting skills, there is a correlation between the family reunification process and parenting services/supports that have an impact on families that reunify. For instance, Inchaurreondo, Fuentes-Pelaez, Vicente, and Bolos (2018) studied the importance of having professional support when promoting positive parenting in the family reunification process. The researchers defined positive parenting has parental behaviors that are non-violent and provide recognition and guidance to the child. Positive parenting skills can include the parent's redirecting and modeling positive behavior, safely engaging with the child, setting clear boundaries and expectations, giving verbal and non-verbal praise, and etc. They found that parents with professional support helped to promote positive parenting and child participation and were likely to have effective family reunification outcomes (Inchaurreondo et al., 2018). According to Inchaurreondo and colleagues (2018), the key components that professionals were required to have when working with these families were positive attitude, open communication, honesty, commitment to the family, empathy, trust and an overall collaborative relationship with the parent and the child. The researchers

also suggested that families have to re-establish family dynamics in order to adapt to their new life post family reunification services (Inchaurrondo et al., 2018). The family can re-establish the family dynamics by utilizing positive parenting skills and their formal and informal support network (Inchaurrondo et al., 2018).

### Importance of Celebrating in Child Welfare

There is minimal information on the topic of reunification celebration. However, when thinking of the celebration of an event one may think about celebrating milestones such as a birthday, graduation, or retirement. Celebrations may create a sense of importance, enforce the accomplishment achieved, and a boost to one's self-esteem. For example, Wilt et al. (2016) found that the week prior to graduation commencement, students who had a high level of meaning in life also had higher levels of meaning in life after the graduation ceremony ended. Meaning in life was defined as a boost in self-esteem and confidence to secure a steady job after graduation; thus, the students who felt more invested in the graduation ceremony had a heightened self-concept in relation to meaning in life once the graduation ceremony was completed (Wilt et al., 2016). Therefore, depending on the investment of parents in the celebration process as a means to boost their self-esteem celebrating reunifications could add this boost to parents who have reunified in child welfare.

Although the child welfare system has gotten involved in a family's life to ensure the safety of the children, when a family reunifies it is a major milestone

or accomplishment for that family. At the study agency, when a family adopts a child, adoptions are celebrated annually. So, why would social workers, the family, and the families support networks celebrate that milestone? This exploratory study will examine the celebration of families reunifying and determine whether the celebration will motivate parents to continue to use the skills they learned while working their case plan.

### Theories Guiding Conceptualization

Since there is limited research on reunification celebrations, the theories that best fit this topic are systems theory, empowerment theory, and Maslow's hierarchy of needs. The systems theory examines the interrelated systems that influence human behaviors (Turner, 2017). In the family reunification process, the parents' system extends from their immediate family, extended family members, non-relative caregivers, friends, child welfare agency, court system, health professionals, therapist/counselors, and other non-social work professionals/organizations. The parents' system has a direct and indirect impact on their reunification success; for example, a lack of collaboration with child welfare agency can reduce the likelihood of family reunification. Although there is a lack of literature on reunification celebrations, the celebration event plays a key part in a larger system in the family's life. The celebration event includes a group of individuals from the child welfare system involved in recognizing the parents' success in reunifying.

In general, the aim of the empowerment theory is to give power and control to oppressed individuals. By empowering an individual, they are likely to take control of their life in order to make the necessary changes they need in their life (Hegar & Hunzeker, 1988). In child welfare, empowerment theory focused on the reality of clients actually implementing the skills they learned rather than simply completing a parenting class (Hegar & Hunzeker, 1988). Hegar & Hunzeker (1988) focused on empowerment theory as parents defining what they expect of themselves as parents. In regards to celebrating, the family empowerment theory suggests that the celebration event will give the parents a voice and insight into their own lives and experiences within child welfare.

Lastly, Maslow's hierarchy of needs fits with the topic of a reunification celebration because it highlights the significance of human motivation. Maslow's hierarchy of needs examines five stages of basic needs that motivate human beings. The five stages of Maslow's theory are physiological, safety, love belonging, esteem needs, and self-actualization (as cited in Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2015). During the family reunification process, the families' basic needs will be addressed and met with the assistance from the child welfare agency such as providing the family with resources for shelter, food, and clothing (physiological), family stability (safety), support systems (love and belonging), and recognition (esteem). In regards to the topic of a reunification celebration, the agency is meeting the needs of the esteem stage when they give recognition to the reunified parents for successfully closing their case and reunifying with

their children. As a result, the event can be seen as a motivator for reunified parents to continue using or learning new positive parenting skills.

### Summary

In summation, chapter two discussed the literature review on reunification to serve as background information and to examine the areas of needed research. Also, this chapter covered the theories guiding conceptualization including systems theory, empowerment theory, and Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODS

#### Introduction

This chapter presents the methods used in the study such as the study's design, sampling, data collection and interview instrument, procedures, protection of human subjects, and qualitative data.

#### Study Design

Due to the lack of research done on a reunification celebration event, the purpose of the study was to explore parent partners' views on the usefulness of the reunification celebration event. Also, the study explored parent partners' perceptions of the impact the event has on reunified parents such as fostering positive parenting skills. This study used open-ended questions that seek to explore parent partners' perceptions of having an event celebrating reunified families.

Since there was limited literature available on this topic and with the reunification celebration being a relatively new event for the study agency, an exploratory study was carried out. The study used a qualitative design to gain a better understanding on the parent partners' perceptions on the reunification celebration event. The researchers conducted individual face-to-face interviews with the participants in various agency offices across the study county. Along

with the interview, the participants were given a demographic form comprised of a few demographic questions.

There were several challenges in conducting this study. One challenge was the length of time qualitative interviews took for the researchers and the participants. The researchers strategically scheduled interviews that worked within the participants and the researchers' schedules. Another challenge was the participants' limited perceptions of the reunification celebration event due to the event being new in the agency. Also, the study is limited because the majority of the parent partners did not personally participated in a reunification celebration event. Therefore, this study will not necessarily be a representative of all reunified parents that have been celebrated at a reunification celebration event. Finally, the study is limited in that it does not include the perspectives of the reunified parents, as the agency would not allow the researchers to interview the agency's current clients.

Once again, this study explored the research question: What are parent partners' perception of reunification celebration event and the impact it has on reunified parents such as fostering positive parenting skills?

### Sampling

This study used convenience sampling to identify potential participants. The researchers contacted parent partners within the agency via email. The sample consisted of the nine parent partners who were currently employed with the agency. Parent partners are individuals that had child welfare cases in the

past and are now employed at the agency as mentor for families currently involved with the child welfare agency. Sampling criteria for the purpose of this study was to be currently employed with the agency as a parent partner and be a participant in the reunification celebration planning committee and/or a prior participant in the reunification celebration event itself. The reason for recruiting only nine participants was because there were only nine parent partners currently employed at the agency and were on the agency's reunification celebration event planning committee.

#### Data Collection and Instruments

This study collected data via face to face interviews using an interview guide comprised of approximately nine questions. The interview questions were open-ended and the participants were encouraged to elaborate on the questions in order for the study to get the most comprehensive view on a reunification celebration event. Prior to presenting the questions from the interview guide, the researchers collected demographic information for the participants that included age, gender, ethnicity, education, and the type of child welfare case they work with as parent partners.

In addition, the questions asked pertain to the parent partners' perceptions of a reunification celebration event such as the usefulness of the reunification celebration event, what was their role in the reunification celebration event, did the parent partners observe positive parenting skills at the event, what was their

view on nominating reunified parents, and etc. These questions were delivered in a clear and concise language so that there were no possible misconceptions.

### Procedures

The agency provided the researchers with contact information for the currently employed parent partners to interview for the study. Parent partners were recruited during office hours (8:00 am - 5:00 pm) from February 26, 2019 to March 19, 2019. The participants were recruited in the various offices that they were assigned to within the agency. The only selection criteria used was that participants be engaged in work as parent partners in the agency. Once participants were recruited and consented to being a part of the study, they were given the option to be interviewed in the office in which they work or in another agency office.

Confidentiality issues were addressed in the informed consent forms distributed prior to the start of the interview. Respect of participant's personal identification was also addressed in the informed consent and no personal identifying information was collected. The participants were informed that the reason they are asking to audio record the interview is so that the researchers can transcribe and analyze the interview for the purpose of the study. Prior to the interview, the participants had the opportunity to review the questions and ask clarifying questions regarding any of the list interview questions. Participants were informed when the audio recording and interview would begin. At the end of the study, the researchers thanked the participants for participating in the study.

and gave the participants a debriefing statement. The researcher explained that the debriefing statement included the purpose of the study, the names of the researchers, the name and contact information of the researchers' advisor if they had further questions regarding the study, and where and when they could find the completed study.

### Protection of Human Subjects

In order to protect the participants in this study, the researchers took appropriate measures to keep the identities of the interview participants confidential. Prior to participating in the interview, each participant was presented with an informed consent and audio consent form where they placed an X on the appropriate line to sign their consent to participating in the interview and to being recorded. All audio interviews were transcribed from the recording and later analyzed. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, confidentiality, voluntary participation, the risk and benefits to participating in the study, and their right to stop the interview at any time or refuse to answer any questions they felt not comfortable answering.

Furthermore, we did not collect personal identifiers such as their name or the specific location at which participants work. Rather, a number code was assigned to each interviewee. Upon completing the interview, the participants were presented with a debriefing statement that highlighted the purpose of the study, informed the participant that no deception was involved in the study,

contact information, and where and when the participants can access the results of this study.

Lastly, all written data was kept in a locked drawer and all of the audio and transcribed data were stored on a password protected computer that could only be accessed by the researchers.

### Data Analysis

This study utilized qualitative data analysis processes to analyze the data collected during the interview process. Data collected from the interviews via audio tape recordings were transcribed verbatim. Individually, the researchers read each interview transcript in its entirety in order to become familiar with the data. Each interviewer wrote notes in a journal during the data analysis that noted the method used in the study, categories, and themes found in the data. Then together, the researchers reviewed the transcripts and used open coding for the purpose of identifying, organizing, analyzing and describing the categories they found in the data. Next, the researchers used axial coding to group categories into broader themes. The researchers then noted the qualities and variations in these themes, comparing participants' perspectives on these themes across the data.

### Summary

In summary, this chapter presented the methodology used in this study. The study used a qualitative design as well as convenience sampling. Face to

face interviews were conducted using an interview guide. Also, discussed in this chapter were the procedures that were used in the study and the appropriate measures the researchers used to protect the subjects that were interviewed. Finally, the data analysis techniques for qualitative research pertaining to this study were discussed in this chapter.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESULTS

#### Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of this study which includes demographic information about the participants and common themes found throughout the nine interviews. The common themes that emerged throughout the interviews were all related to parent partners' perceptions of reunification celebration event, such as, the importance of recognition, the selection criteria for nomination, reunified parents' perceptions of being nominated/honored, parental growth, and the growth of the reunification celebration event.

#### Presentation of the Findings

The participants included nine parent partners from a child welfare agency in Southern California. There were eight female participants and one male participant from different racial/ethnic backgrounds which included African American/Black, Hispanic/Latino, and Caucasian. The ages of the participants ranged from 25 to 64 years old. In regards to the highest educational level of the participants, six of the participants had some college/ associate degrees, one participant was a high school graduate or had the equivalent (GED), and two participants had less than high school/ some high school education. Furthermore, all nine participants reported working with voluntary family maintenance cases,

court ordered family reunification cases, and court ordered family maintenance cases.

Common themes that emerged during the interviews were the importance of recognition, reunified parents' perceptions of being nominated and or honored at event, the selection criteria for being nominated for the event, the growth of the reunified parents, and the growth of the reunification celebration.

### Importance of Recognition

When participants were asked about their experience with the reunification celebration they expressed how important it is to the families to be recognized and appreciated for their accomplishment of overcoming obstacles to reunify with their child(ren). One participant said,

Some of our parents' cases have been closed for multiple years, you know what I mean? Not just a year or not just six months. And so when they come back, they're like, you still remember me. You know? And it's good to be remembered by some of the things, the good things that we've done, our lives, you know? (Participant 4).

Another participant stated the reaction that the families have during the event demonstrates the significance of the reunification celebration to the reunified parents and their children. The participant explained, "It's a great opportunity to celebrate success because the unfortunate thing is, is that you don't always see that success" (Participant 8). Another participant expanded on the importance of the event to the entire family.

You get to see their face and not only their face but their significant others or their children's face light up. Like wow, you know, that that's the most inspiring moment for me in the whole event. (Participant 6).

Other participants discussed the removal of a child from one's care as a negative experience in one's life, so to be able to be celebrated at the end of such a negative experience helps to boost the parents' self-esteem.

So, you know, I just, I think, and I also think, like I said, uh, having your children removed has such a negative connotation to it and it's such a negative experience and to at the end of it gets something so positive, like good job and have everybody applaud you and have your story told and be an inspiration to other people who may be struggling through it. Um, like I think that's a really positive way to end something that was probably such a horrible chapter in your life (Participant 8).

None of the participants were honored or celebrated in a reunification celebration of their own, because when they were involved with the agency there was no such thing as a reunification celebration. However, when asked a follow-up question regarding how the participant would feel had they been celebrated in this way, one participant stated she would have appreciated being celebrated as a reunified parent when she went through the system,

Oh, I would love it. Like I said, I wish that this was something that we did back when I was doing it because, I think more than anything for my children, I think that my children would really benefited from it. Um, and I

just think it's great. I think it's great. I think it's great and I think that, you know, every family should be acknowledged. (Participant 9).

### Reunified Parents' Perceptions of being Nominated/Honored

Participants were asked to describe the reunified parents' feelings about the event. Participants expressed a wide range of responses from parents to being invited to participate in the reunification celebration. One participant described a very positive reaction from an invited parent. "Like they were just totally excited once we got them there to show them like nothing. We're not, yeah, we're not here to interrupt you. We just want to really appreciate, um, show you how much we appreciate it." (Participant 3). Another participant described a very different reaction from parents.

Um, I think that's a mixed, mixed answer there because there are some that we do nominate and they do get selected and then we try to contact them and they want nothing to do with us. They won't even answer.

"You're from where", oh click. I don't want that, you know? Um, but then there's others that, um, are excited. They're excited to be recognized, uh, I think they are appreciative. I think they're really thrilled (Participant 6).

When asked how the participants felt the reunified parents feel about the event one participant responded,

Unfortunately, some of the families they kindly decline after they're done with [the agency] they're like, yeah, I mean I love my social worker or glad I got my kids back or my parent partner, was great. But yeah, no, I don't

want any further. It's too scary for me or I don't want any part to do with you guys anymore. (Participant 5).

In general, our participants reported divergent responses from some parents who felt honored and excited about being nominated, but from other parents who were fearful of further contact with the agency and who did not want to revisit what seemed to be a negative experience.

### Selection Criteria

Participants were asked about the nomination and selection process for the honorees of the reunification celebration. Parent partners in this agency are encouraged to nominate at least five reunified parents from each region whom they felt deserved to be honored in this celebration and meet the basic selection criteria of a closed case for a minimum of six months and no new substantiated referrals. However, social workers are encouraged to nominate deserving reunified parents' as well, following the same selection criteria. During a reading and rating session where the nominations are read by the supervisor and voted on by the parent partners', supervisors, and other professionals the top 20 families are selected. Once selected the calling process begins which consists of parent partners' making contact with the honorees, inviting them to the event, and getting a head count of honorees who accept and will attend the celebration. The second part to this question asked if the participants looked for anything specific when they began to nominate potential honorees for the celebration. Most of the participants felt there had to be some sort of meaningful persistence

and determination exhibited by the parent for the participant to consider them as a nominee. Many of the participants responded they look for parents who struggled and overcame their struggles in extraordinary ways by exhibiting resiliency. For example, one participant stated,

I try to select the ones who really wanted their kids and they put forth an effort and no matter how they got knocked down or how many times they were told something different than what they were told the first time they kept moving, they kept listening to what the social worker said or what I said and how they needed to move forward (Participant 2).

Another participant responded, "So it's like a, it's families that have like a lot of odds stacked against them and it shows that like they put in the work and from them doing all the work to get their kids back, then you want to recognize them." (Participant 5).

Most participants responded that they look for resilient parents to select as nominees, but one participant felt some parents deserved to be recognized in this event more than others. For instance, this participant stated,

And it's not to say that other parents don't deserve it, but to me, anybody can go to a class and get a certificate, you know, but when you're told no, a lot of our parents give up, you know what I mean? And this mom was not giving up from nothing, you know (Participant 4).

While, social workers are encouraged to participate in the nomination process, they tend to be busy with their caseload and do not make nominating a

deserving parent to be celebrated a priority. Whereas, parent partners host this event, have smaller caseloads, and the time to nominate parents they feel deserve to be honored at this event. Thus, parent partners are primarily responsible for nominating honorees.

### Growth as Reunified Parents

We asked participants to explain how the parents who have been selected in the reunification celebration event perceive their own use of parenting skills. All of the participants reported that the selected parents experienced growth as parents. One participant responded “a lot of [the parents] are like, ah, I didn't know I had a problem with parenting, but I learned in my parenting class that I didn't know anything about parenting” (Participant 1). Another participant provided an example of parental growth when they described how much a mother has grown since the participants started working with her. The participants stated “I think she perceives herself as a far more capable parent than she, she, I don't think she probably questions herself the way she used to question herself” (Participant 8).

Furthermore, when asked to describe the parenting skills parents had used during the event, the participants generally found that reunified parents have demonstrated positive parenting skills, such as, redirecting and modeling behaviors, engaging the child(ren), and providing guidance to the child(ren) at the event.

Two participants specifically provided their perceptions on why some parents may not experience parental growth and/or not use positive parenting skills at the reunification celebration event. For example, one participants stated:

I think um, as far as [the nominated parents] it's sometimes their mindset. They go back to their old ways, you know, like the department pulls away then some unfortunately due go back to their old, old parenting skills (Participant 6).

Another participant expanded on this perception, explaining,

Um, I think some of [the nominated parents] are a little nervous at the event because it is [the agency] and they're afraid to really get in there, and um, to be like, hey, you need to sit down. And so some of the times, occasionally I've seen [the nominated parents] like, just let them run wild because they're afraid because of the department (Participant 7).

Participants had various responses of what they experienced during the event in observing the honorees parent their children.

#### Growth of the Reunification Celebration Event

When the participants were asked what changes they would like to see done in the reunification celebration event, a majority of the participants suggested that there should be more social worker participation in the event and in the nomination process. One participant stated that "I think just having social workers be more nominating and more open to it, I think would bring a better outcome" (Participant 5).

The participants of the study acknowledged that social workers in the agency have nominated reunified parents and have been invited and participated in the reunification celebration events in the past. However, the participants recognized that social workers' workloads and whether there was good rapport built between the client and worker may be factors in them not nominating as much or participating in the event. Most of the participants felt that social worker involvement in the nomination process and the event may make the reunified parents feel a different sense of importance and recognition because their social worker is at the event acknowledging their success in reunifying with their children. One participant stated that "we've some social workers are like really she got nominated. I'm going! [Laughter]. Like, and some are like no, you know, I don't want to go. But I really think it would be, it would mean a lot to them" (Participant 3). Other participants explained the reaction reunified parents experienced when social workers were present at the event, for example,

You can see the parents who all hyped up when their social workers there as opposed to the ones who social workers are not there. You know what I'm saying? Because the social worker, sometimes will stand up and give accolades to the family or say how the family impacted them. You know what I'm saying? Or how they impacted the family or different things like that. So, I think that's what needs, yeah. It, they need to be there (Participant 2).

In addition, the participants in the study would like to see changes in the number of parents honored at the reunification celebration event. Almost all of the participants stated that they wanted to see more families nominated and honored at the event. For example, one participant said that “there’s a total of 20 families that get nominated and I feel, um, that um, number should grow and more [family] participation” (Participant 1). Another participant stated,

I would say 20 families from each region. We have 20 families total. You know. So I’m visualizing 20 families from each region and I’m sure you know that would be possible because there’s a lot of families that, that have accomplished their, their, their case plan (Participant 6).

On the other hand, a participant felt like the growth of the reunification celebration event should have a better distribution of child welfare staff and nominated parents. The participant said, “but I don’t know, maybe to grow a little bit bigger, invite less staff and more, more, parents because it seems like it’s like, I don’t know like 60% staff and, and maybe 40% parents” (Participant 7).

Lastly, when asked if there was anything else the participants would like for the researchers or the agency to know about the event, some participants recommended that as the reunification celebration event grows there could be more outside agencies and community partners involvement in the event and nomination process.

## Conclusion

In summary, the chapter discussed the data collected from the nine participants. The participants' demographics information included the gender, race/ethnicity, age, highest educational level, and the type of cases the participants work within the agency. The data retrieved from the qualitative interview identified five common themes that were discussed in this chapter.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSION

#### Introduction

This chapter discussed the researchers' analysis and interpretation of the presented findings of this study. The research findings are presented in relation to previous research which examined celebrations in a general sense. This chapter also discussed the limitations of the study as well as the recommendations for social work practice and future research.

#### Discussion

Overall, participants identified several layers of the importance of celebrating and recognizing reunification as an accomplishment. These layers included the growth and resiliency of the parent and a boost to the parent's self-esteem. Generally thinking of celebrations one may consider birthdays, graduations, and retirements as milestones to be celebrated which in turn create a sense of purpose or importance and reinforce the accomplishment. Our findings suggest that reunification celebrations provide some of the same positive effects to the person(s) being celebrated. Although there is little existing literature on celebrations in child welfare, this finding is consistent with more general research on the impact of celebrations (Wilt et al., 2016).

Participants did not specifically recognize the reunified parents' use of positive parenting skills as being significant in the reunification celebration event.

Rather, participants remarked on parents' growth as parents and their ability to overcome adversity. This is consistent with empowerment theory which focuses on parents' definitions of what they expect of themselves and their abilities to take the initiative in their lives and make the necessary changes to parent adequately (Hegar & Hunzeker, 1988).

A majority of the participants emphasized parents' responses to adversity and their resilience. They remarked on parents' abilities to overcome obstacles such as homelessness, substance use or mental disorders, as well as their responses to being told "no" or "your services are terminated." Participants described these as guiding factors for why that parent should be celebrated at this event. For example, participants referred to the looks on the parent, the child(ren), and or other family members' faces along with the honorees' narrations as empowering and enlightening pieces of the celebration. Also, participants described the importance of giving that celebrated parent a sense of purpose for the trauma their family experienced and a boost in their self-esteem in knowing that at the end of such a traumatic experience they were recognized for accomplishing the goal of reunifying with their child(ren). This is in a sense consistent with literature that focused on the importance of having professional support when promoting positive parenting in the family reunification process (Inchaurrondo et al., 2018). While, this study focused on professional support for the parents' during the reunification process and did not mention this process as

traumatic, professional support can also be applied after successful family reunification to continue to encourage positive parenting skills.

When considering what theories would be applicable to the reunification celebration, the researchers perceived the agency would meet the needs of the esteem stage by recognizing parents for successfully reunifying with their children and keeping their case closed. Our findings suggest that the agency does just that with the reunification celebration. Participants indirectly referenced the esteem stage in Maslow's hierarchy of needs related to the importance of recognition as a guiding factor of the reunification celebration (as cited in Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2015). Participants perceived the celebration as a motivator for reunified parents to continue using positive parenting skills. While participants hinted at the assumption that parents should not put their child(ren) in harm's way or have them removed from their care, participants also asserted that it is important to celebrate when families reunify.

Participants deemed the celebration as important because it reinforces the reunified parents' growth as a parent along with their determination to overcome adversity to reunify with their child(ren). This is consistent with research on students which suggests that participating in these kinds of celebrations gives meaning and a boost in self-confidence (Wilt et al., 2016). Participants in this study reported that honorees gained a sense of appreciation and recognition once they were honored and celebrated at this reunification celebration. In addition, the honorees' families were able to take part in the celebration and see

the celebrated parent in a new light which continues to foster growth and resiliency in the parent and family.

### Limitations

There were several limitations to this study that need to be taken into consideration. First, the data collected in this study was limited to a small sample size of nine parent partners from one child welfare agency. Therefore, the findings of this study may not reflect other child welfare agencies and staff's perceptions of reunification celebration events. Second, the data collected in this study is limited to the perceptions of parent partners who observed, but were not honored at a reunification celebration event. Therefore, another limitation of this study was the lack of perspectives from reunified parents/families who were honored at the agency's reunification celebration events. Unfortunately, the researchers were unable to recruit parent participants in the reunification celebration due to agency restrictions on research with clients. The study also did not include the perspectives of social workers that could have provided supplemental insight into reunification celebration events. As a result, the lack of various perspectives limited the results of the findings.

### Recommendations for Social Work Practice and Research

#### Social Work Practice

The research can be used in social work practice to better understand the usefulness of reunification celebration events in child welfare agencies. The

findings of this study suggest that celebration events may shift the negative narrative of child welfare practice, boost parents' self-esteem, and foster positive parenting and parental growth. In addition, the researchers recommend that child welfare agencies and key staff members consider implementing some sort of celebration throughout the family reunification process to encourage and recognize successful family reunification efforts.

Furthermore, a common theme in the findings was the importance of more social worker participation in the event and in the nomination process. Therefore, the researchers suggest agencies consider incentives to increasing social worker involvement in the reunification celebration process. Similarly, other child welfare agencies should consider adopting this reunification celebration approach.

### Social Work Research

Future research on this topic should include participants across multiple agencies in order to get a better understanding of reunification celebration events in other child welfare agencies. Also, future research should include the perceptions of social workers and or other professionals involved in reunification celebration events. Incorporating the perspectives of a variety of individuals would improve our understanding of the usefulness of the events for reunified parents and child welfare agencies. It is important to note that social workers and or other professionals' insights about the event could provide valuable information to foster further growth of the event in child welfare agencies. Furthermore, future research would benefit from obtaining insight from reunified

parents who were honored at a reunification celebration. The research study involving these participants could examine the impact reunification celebration events has on their overall perceptions of the child welfare system, their own growth as parents, and their use of positive parenting skills. Reunified parents' perceptions of the reunification celebration event could also contribute to the growth of the event and to identify whether post-reunification follow-up is a needed service for reunified parents and their families.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, this study identified several factors that contributed to the positive impact a reunification celebration has on the reunified parent and family. Those factors include the importance of recognition, reunified parents perception of being nominated and or celebrated, selection criteria, and growth as parents. This study also examined the complex layers of concepts that were considered subsections to the overall theme of growth of the reunification celebration. The researchers are hopeful that this study will encourage future studies of reunification celebrations and encourage more child welfare agencies to participate in celebrations that recognize reunified families. Researchers also hope that this study will encourage more social workers to get involved in the nomination process and attend the event.

APPENDIX A  
INTERVIEW QUESTION GUIDE

## Interview Question Guide

Created by Tre’Nise Anderson and Marley Walker

1. Describe your role as a parent partner?
2. Describe your role in the reunification celebration, also known as Families Matter event.
3. Tell us about your experience with the reunification celebration event.
4. What is the criteria for selecting reunified parents?
  - a. Is there anything specific that you look for or that stands out to you during the nomination and selection process? Explain.
5. How do you think reunified parents feel about this event? Useful? Not Useful?
6. Tell us how you think the families who have been selected as participants perceive their own use of parenting skills.
7. Describe the parenting skills parents had used during the event. Any \*positive parenting skills?
8. What changes would you like to see done in this reunification celebration event?
9. Is there anything else that you would like for us or the agency to know about the event?

*\*Positive parenting skills are parental behaviors that are non-violent and provide recognition and guidance to the child. (Example: redirecting and modeling behaviors, engaging the child, setting boundaries/expectations, giving praise, and etc.)*

APPENDIX B  
INFORMED CONSENT



California State University, San Bernardino  
Social Work Institutional Review Board Sub-Committee  
APPROVED 2/25/2019 VOID AFTER 2/24/22  
IRB# SW1905 CHAIR *Janerck*

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences  
School of Social Work  
**INFORMED CONSENT**

The study in which you are asked to participate is designed to examine parent partners' perceptions of the reunification celebration event in San Bernardino County, Children and Family Services. The study is being conducted by Tre'Nise Anderson and Marley Walker, MSW students under the supervision of Dr. Deirdre Lanesskog, assistant professor in the School of Social Work at 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 explore the usefulness of reunification celebration based on the perception of parent partners.

**DESCRIPTION:** Participants will be asked a few questions on their perception of reunification celebration events such as the usefulness of celebrating reunified parents and the impact a reunification celebration has on promoting positive parenting skills. This interview will be tape recorded as part of the data collection process.

**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 20 to 30 minutes to complete the interview.

**RISKS:** There are minimal 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 Dr. Deirdre Lanesskog at 909-537-7222 (email: [dlanesskog@csusb.edu](mailto:dlanesskog@csusb.edu)).

**RESULTS:** Results of the study can be obtained from the Pfau Library ScholarWorks (<http://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu>) at California State University, San Bernardino after July 2019.

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

\_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_  
Place an X mark here

I agree to be tape recorded: Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

909.537.5501 · 909.537.7029

5500 UNIVERSITY PARKWAY, SAN BERNARDINO, CA 92407-2393

The California State University · Bakersfield · Channel Islands · Chico · Dominguez Hills · East Bay · Fresno · Fullerton · Humboldt · Long Beach · Los Angeles · Maritime Academy · Monterey Bay · Northridge · Pomona · Sacramento · San Bernardino · San Diego · San Francisco · San Jose · San Luis Obispo · San Marcos · Sonoma · Stanislaus

APPENDIX C  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

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

Researcher(s) Tre'Nise Anderson & Marley Walker  
Proposal Title Parent Partners' Perceptions of Reunification Celebrations and the Impact on Reunified Parents  
# SW1905

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:

- 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:

- faculty signature missing  
 missing informed consent  debriefing statement  
 revisions needed in informed consent  debriefing  
 data collection instruments missing  
 agency approval letter missing  
 CITI missing  
 revisions in design needed (specified below)

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Janeer Ch  
Committee Chair Signature

2/25/2019  
Date

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

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## ASSIGNED RESPONSIBILITIES

Two researchers were responsible for completing this study.

Responsibilities were listed below:

1. Data collection:

By: Tre’Nise Anderson and Marley Walker

2. Transcribing and Analysis:

By: Tre’Nise Anderson and Marley Walker

3. Report Writing:

a. Introduction and Literature Review:

By: Tre’Nise Anderson and Marley Walker

b. Methods:

By: Tre’Nise Anderson and Marley Walker

c. Results:

By: Tre’Nise Anderson and Marley Walker

d. Discussion:

By: Tre’Nise Anderson and Marley Walker