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Bridging the Gap Between Foster Youth and Higher Education: Perspectives of Social Workers

Marielena Lozano

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BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN FOSTER YOUTH
AND HIGHER EDUCATION: PERSPECTIVES OF SOCIAL WORKERS

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

by
Marielena Lozano

May 2021

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ABSTRACT

This research examined the perceptions of child welfare social workers in their role of supporting foster youth. Specifically, this study will focus on factors contributing to support for foster youth to obtain post-secondary education or vocational training.

This study utilized a qualitative research design. Data were collected from individual, semi-structured interviews with six volunteer participants in Southern and Northern California using a snowball sampling method. Throughout the interviews, the researcher asked current or former child welfare social workers to describe their perceptions and experiences in supporting foster youth in obtaining higher education.

The study found several themes related to the presenting problem. One of the themes found that social workers were restricted from spending extra time with individuals on their cases due to high caseloads. Another theme that was discovered was the discrepancy between knowledge of programs that support foster youth and the actual utilization of these programs. A third theme that emerged from the data was the realization that foster youth were often times focusing on short-term goals as opposed to long-term achievements.

One recommendation for social work practice is to train social workers to emphasize the importance of higher education when working with youth in the foster care system. Training coupled with accountability of this action would place an increased importance for social workers to touch upon with the foster youth

they come across. Another implication is the amount of time social workers realistically have with each of their clients. To mitigate this, it is recommended that social workers be assigned a more manageable caseload. The significance of this study is to aid and improve the current practice of social work.

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I would like to acknowledge the contributions of the social work participants in this study. Your knowledge and experiences are essential to developing new ways to reach a further amount of lives and promoting academic achievement. Thank you for sparing your time to participate in this research.

DEDICATION

First and foremost, I would like to express my appreciation to my parents Raul and Rocio. Sin su incansable trabajo y sacrificio, ninguno de mis logros serían possible. No tengo palabras para expresar mi agradecimiento por todos los modos en que me han apoyado Los amo con todo mi corazón.

To my brothers Raul, Adrian and Carlos who have always pushed me to be the best individual I can be. I am so proud to be your little sister. I love you guys.

To the friends I have made along this journey, who have inspired me in countless ways and continue to be my support, a million thank yous.

I would also like to thank the individuals I have met at EOP – Renaissance Scholars. Thank you for showing me what it looks like to be absolutely dedicated to providing assistance to foster youth. You have inspired me more than you know.

I dedicate this research to foster youth everywhere. Know that there are so many individuals genuinely concerned about your success. You are not your odds, and you are capable of the extraordinary.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Problem Statement

The foster care system is composed of children and adolescents who have been removed from their homes due to varying reasons. In California alone from 2016 to 2018, the most common reasons for removal and entry into the foster care system were due to caregiver neglect (87%) or physical abuse (7%) (Webster et al., 2019). Although foster care is considered a temporary arrangement, children who do not successfully reunify with their parents or find another permanent home remain dependents of the court until they age out at 18 years or become emancipated prior to. Qualifying young adults can continue receiving benefits from the system as non-minor dependents until the age of 21 (AB 12 Extended Foster Care Program and Benefits, 2012). Still, current and former foster youth are at a heightened vulnerability of encountering numerous challenges that have the potential to adversely affect different aspects of their lives. One of the greatest adversely impacted area in the lives of foster youth can be seen in levels of educational attainment.

Despite an increase in developing programs and initiatives at state and local levels with the focus of assisting foster youth in obtaining post-secondary education, much of this population lacks the information, motivation, or factors of support necessary for such a feat. In 1986, officials discovered an influx in foster youth transitioning out of the system with little to no life preparation and created

the Independent Living Program (ILP). This program allocated funding to states to provide resources aimed at increasing youth self-sufficiency and preparation for those who will age out of the system (Lemon, Hines & Merdinger, 2005). ILP offers daily living skills trainings, educational services, and benefits to assist current and former foster or juvenile probation youth members between 16-21 years of age (The Independent Living Program, 2012). Services also include housing assistance and an emphasized promotion of educational or vocational training programs. Other macro-level changes have also worked to support foster youth in having an equal opportunity at obtaining higher education. The California Chafee Grant, which is a part of the John Chafee Foster Care Independence Program, introduced additional funding under an Educational and Training Vouchers Program (Mares, 2010). Better known as the Chafee Grant, this program provides eligible youth up to \$5,000 per year. This grant can be used towards a technical school, community college, state university, university of California, or other private or independent colleges (California Student Aid Commission).

Despite programs like these, adolescents who exit the foster system are at a disproportionate risk of not obtaining any post-secondary education or training. Still, those who decide to pursue higher education are at a higher risk of dropping out prior to graduating compared to the general population. According to a National Factsheet on the Educational Outcomes of Children in Foster Care (2018), 70%-84% of 17 and 18-year-old foster youth reported the desire to

pursue higher education, while only 20% who graduated high school actually went to college or a vocational school. Of these, only 2-9% successfully attained a bachelor's degree from a university. In comparison, the national college enrollment in 2015 was 69.2% with a college completion rate of 32.5%.

Children and adolescents who are a part of the foster care system maintain regular communication with their case-carrying social worker or foster family agency social worker. For some foster youth, their social workers are the only consistent adults in their lives. Having this information in mind, a crucial role of social workers is to ensure that foster youth are prepared for the transition from foster care to adulthood. Even with various programs that aim to assist youth, social workers may often encounter requirements and limitations. For example, the Independent Living Program, which only allocates assistance to young adults up to the age of 21 (Independent Living Program, 2012). Nevertheless, it is evident that foster youth benefit from a continued support system or at least one adult who is interested in their future wellbeing.

Purpose of the Study

Aside from challenges youth face that led to their placement into the foster system to begin with, many barriers continue to arise during and even after they are in care. One factor that affects foster youth's educational outcomes is placement instability. There seems to be a trend in placement instability leading to educational disparities. According to a California study, 75% of foster youth that were sampled had transferred schools (Frerer, Sosenko, Pellegrin, Manchik,

Horowitz, 2013). Changes in school placements alone account for significant delays since material, coursework, and classroom pace vary from individual teachers and school districts.

There is a clear disparity in the amount of foster youth that are graduating from high school and enrolling in a system of higher education in comparison to those who have not had an experience with foster care. Only between 31%-45% of foster youth who graduated from high school enrolled in college (Courtney et. al, 2010). However, on a national level the rate of college enrollment in 2009 was at 70% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). Foster youth continue to lack supporting roles and mentorships that, on average, the general population of students receive from their parents or family members.

Youth who remain a part of the system under foster care have access to programs and support from their social workers. In some agencies, there are social workers whose sole purpose is to provide information and resources to youth in obtaining higher education. However, this is not a widespread practice and looks different among varying counties. Regardless of specific roles or duties, all social workers have an ethical duty to the values of service, social justice, and competence, amongst others. It is reasonable to expect that a social worker is equipped with knowledge in areas of post-secondary education including resources available or supportive local and state programs in order to be best provide support to foster youth on their caseloads.

Significance of the Study for Social Work Practice

Despite empirical research on the constraints that foster youth face, there is very limited information on the roles that child welfare social workers specifically take to support foster youth. Although foster youth in past studies have identified their social workers as part of their support, it is not evident that there is a common practice or policy in place. In opening up the conversation to the perceptions of social workers, this study can help bridge the disconnect between foster youth and educational attainment.

It may be reasonable to question whether programs of this nature constrain the scope of practice of a case-carrying social worker, or perhaps high-volume caseloads may affect whether or not social workers have the knowledge of services and programs that assist foster youth and young adolescents. This study aims to explore these challenges to better gain knowledge of factors that inhibit foster youth's educational attainment.

The purpose of this study is to identify and examine social worker's experiences and steps of action taken in support of foster youth obtaining post-secondary education. What are some challenges that social workers face in bridging the gap between education and adverse life outcomes? In exploring this information, new policies can be developed in order to assist foster youth in having a positive outcome, despite having current or former system involvement.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter will describe the literature relating to barriers or challenges uniquely encountered by current and former foster youth in the educational setting. It will also explore factors that support their educational achievement or post-secondary attainment. The chapter will also identify, define and discuss the theories that guided the conceptualization of this study.

Challenges Encountered by Foster Youth

It is evident that youth who grow up or even spend some part of their childhood in the foster care system are prone to far more challenges than those who grow up and remain within their family of origin. From the beginning of CWS involvement following sustained allegations that warrant removal, to enduring the rollercoaster of reunification or finding their place within the system, and even after “aging out”, foster youth face barriers in many different forms. One of the greatest adverse impacts can be seen in foster youths’ levels of educational attainment.

The study by Shin (2003) described how foster care had the potential of negatively affecting levels of educational achievement in adolescents. 152 youth in foster care were surveyed using five standardized instruments to explore reading ability. The mean age of the adolescents surveyed was 17, of which 34%

reported being placed in a special education classroom or program (Shin, 2003). Further, an area of concern was the significantly low average reading level attained by foster youth. 33% of the adolescents had a reading level below the 6th grade. In comparison, only 18% read at a level between 9th and 11th grade. Shin also discovered a trend that youth in out-of-home care who had lower reading levels were attributed to having higher levels of depression as measured by mental health assessments. Adolescents who were raised in kinship foster care generally scored higher on the mental health exam, and were described as having a more positive affect, stronger emotional ties to others in their community, and notably higher reading skills (Shin, 2003). This study indicates a strong correlation between social support and higher levels of achievement in foster youth.

Challenges faced in obtaining higher education by current or former foster youth vary tremendously. Factors identified by Piel (2018) detailed how different stages of one's time within the system can affect this outcome. For one, youth who struggle with instability in placements at an early age will likely see a negative effect in their education. In turn, this will affect their preparation and decision to continue pursuing education or otherwise. Still, according to Courtney et al. (2011), as cited by Piel (2018), over 70% of youth in a study expressed desire to continue education after completing high school. Though once a current or former foster youth makes the decision to pursue higher education (39%), they are typically enduring ongoing mental health issues and are more likely to lack

financial, social, or emotional support (Courtney et al., 2011). Only 10% of foster youth end up graduating a college or university by age 25 (Courtney et al., 2011).

Another factor that negatively affects youth in the foster care system is placement instability. The meta-analytic review by Konijn et al. (2019) shared a review of the factors that affect placement instability in foster care. The studies found and analyzed different factors that contributed to placement instability, such as behavior problems, non-kinship care, children's age and characteristics. The study exemplified that behavioral problems of youth in care can even be a cause or a consequence of placement instability. This study was limited in the sense that it found some indications of publication bias in the articles that were analyzed, as well as some lack of specialized information regarding foster care homes. Moreover, the study offered strategies directed at child welfare agencies including a better matching system for children and foster parents.

The study by the National Council on Disability (NCD) (2008) published research focusing on youth with disabilities in the foster care system, taking a look at barriers to success as well as offering policy solutions. The study highlighted many of the overwhelmingly negative statistics of youth in the child welfare system including issues of mental health, criminal offences, homelessness, high rate of teen pregnancy, and low rate of educational success. This research also found that youth with disabilities are up to 3.5 times more likely to experience abuse or neglect that result in separation from their family of origin.

James (2004) published a study that examined reasons for placement changes in foster care. The study collected data on the placement changes for a total of 1, 084 children in foster care in a California public county. Among the findings, it was determined that 20 percent of all changes are related to youth's behavior. The study found that some factors that increase the risk of placement change include older age, behaviors that are externalized, and victims of abuse (James, 2004). Limitations to this study included the exclusion of children with frequent changes in placement as well as the focus of the study on a group of children with lengthy stays in care.

Support Factors for Foster Youth

In response to the obvious problem affecting foster youth's educational success, various state and local initiatives have increased awareness and emphasized the importance of programs that address some of their needs. Though emerging studies continue to examine the negative outcomes, few detail a range of supporting factors and none that identify a specific formula to bridge the gap of achievement.

Salazar and colleagues (2016) developed a study called the Fostering Higher Education intervention with the goal of identifying a structured program to benefit foster youth. The study included a focus group made up of community stakeholders with experience or knowledge in child welfare and the foster system. A trend in the findings was that stakeholders placed an emphasis on the collaboration of efforts and communication that should occur between a foster

youth and their support network. These findings imply that there may be a disconnect between the availability of resources and foster youth members themselves.

The study by Skillbred, Iversen, and Moldestad (2017) analyzed the qualitative interviews with 16 foster care alumni who have completed their educational goals or are in the process of doing so. The main themes of importance discovered amongst the cohort were individual motivation and qualities of their foster homes. Specifically, those homes which took school seriously, provided order and structure, but also a feeling of belonging for the child or adolescent (Skillbred et al., 2017). This study implicates the importance of motivation within the home or at least a supportive adult role, which for many foster youths are their case-carrying social workers.

The chapter by Whitman (2018) sought to provide recommendations for collegiate programs aimed at providing services to foster youth. Whitman (2018) highlighted that some effective social work practices included supportive networks of programs and services like EOPS and detailed the importance of providing staff support and holistic support. The study emphasized the need to connect with foster youth and inform them of the services that are available. The study infers that many of the services available to foster youth are underutilized, possibly by a lack of information of services.

Individual resiliency is a key factor related to outcomes of success in obtaining educational achievement. Resiliency, as defined by the Merriam-

Webster dictionary, is the ability to recover from or adjust to misfortune or change. However, professionals in the field of social work have determined that there is much more to the development of an individual's resiliency. Benard (2004) examined the different conceptualizations that are often attributed to individual measurements of resiliency which include personal strength and environmental factors, two areas which are extremely broad. Factors that contribute to a positive environment consist of a positive family life, school, community and an emphasis on caring relationships with opportunities to thrive. Personal strengths were defined by 4 facets: problem solving, social competence, autonomy, and a sense of purpose (Benard. 2004).

Theories Guiding Conceptualization

Theoretical perspectives used to conceptualize the ideas of this project are influenced by a theme of the theories presented from the literature. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory (1994) examines the multiple "systems" that influence the development of an individual. These systems are made up of an individual's environment, divided into the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

The microsystem is the most intimate system, made up of one's "immediate environment" such as family members, friends, teachers, and to include activities and roles performed by the individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). In foster youth, this would also include their foster family, relatives, and child welfare workers. The interaction between different counterparts, or "cross

relationships” in the microsystem are described by the mesosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). The ability for a child to build positive relationships with their community is important to healthy development. This interaction, or collaboration between microsystems is especially important in the lives of foster youth.

The exosystem is described as the factors in an individual’s life that do not directly include them, but potentially affect them nonetheless (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Further, Bronfenbrenner identified three exosystems that have the greatest influence in a child’s development: their parents’ workplace, family social networks, and neighborhood communities (Eckenrode & Gore 1990, Cochran et al. 1990, Pence 1988, as cited by Bronfenbrenner, 1994). The macrosystem then goes on to include society and cultural values and norms within a child’s environment. These values encompass life-styles, belief systems, culture, political ideologies, and even the opportunities given in any environment. Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory is imperative to understanding some of the factors that contribute to a healthy, or otherwise unhealthy development, especially in the lives of foster youth. These interrelated systems play a direct role as supporting or hindering factors that contribute to different aspects of life, including education. The study by Piel et al. (2017) took an approach of studying foster family resiliency by understanding the factors identified as social support. The findings showed that families benefited from social support at micro, meso,

and macro levels, thus contributing directly to retention levels of resource families for foster youth.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

This chapter will provide an overview of the methodology utilized in discovering social workers' perceptions of their role in supporting foster youth in obtaining post-secondary education. More specifically, this section will detail the design of the study, methodology for sampling, the data collection and instruments, procedures of the study, protection of human subjects, and the methodology for analyzing the collected data.

Study Design

The purpose of this study is to explore the knowledge and skills social workers perceive themselves to have in regard to providing support to foster youth in obtaining post-secondary education. This exploratory study has the intention of understanding and identifying implications that have the potential to benefit new policies to provide additional support to foster youth and child welfare social workers. In order to fulfill this purpose, the study used a qualitative, semi-structured, individual interview methodology. Individual interviews allowed the social workers to provide substantial experiential information, as opposed to selecting pre-conceived answers from a survey. The use of a semi-structured interview guide allowed for the conversation to remain productive, while allowing the participants to go into detail about their

experiences and perspectives. There are some limitations to this methodology in terms of the researcher's capacity to recruit and interview a large sample size. However, even a small sample size will be a great contribution since there is not yet much research available from the perspectives of social workers. Another limitation is related to the COVID-19 Pandemic, which hindered the ability to schedule in-person interviews, as well as limiting the sample size due to an increase in case load sizes.

Sampling

This study used a snowball sampling method in order to recruit voluntary participants. Criteria for participants included current and former child welfare social workers. No other sampling criteria was used. Once IRB approval of the study was obtained on December 1, 2020, the researcher began to call upon professional social workers within their personal circle in order to recruit participants for the study. The researcher was seeking a maximum of 10 participants. The voluntary participants were contacted with a private message, inquiring if they are willing and able to be a part of the research. Participants who agreed to volunteer then received an email with information on the purpose of the study and informed consent along with a link to schedule an interview at their convenience. The researcher was able to connect with a total of 6 social workers in different counties throughout Southern and Northern California.

Data Collection and Instruments

The qualitative design of this study allowed social workers to share greater insight of their personal experiences in assisting foster youth with higher education. One-on-one interviews with each participant were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide to allow for an open discussion pertaining to social workers' individual perceptions. The interviews took place via Zoom and FaceTime. First, the following demographic information was collected: gender, ethnicity, highest level of education, and amount of time working within child welfare. Afterwards, open-ended questions regarding foster youth, their goals for higher education, as well as barriers perceived by social workers. The questions prompted the participants to share in detail and expand on their experiences in providing support to foster youth in obtaining education. Open-ended questions regarding social worker's individual knowledge of resources and programs, supporting factors in their agencies that allow facilitation of programs as well as their effectiveness, and any recommendations to increase support to foster youth. The questions were designed to facilitate an open dialogue between the researcher and participant, while maintaining a structure for the interview.

Procedures

Once IRB approval was obtained on December 1, 2020, participants were recruited through the researcher's personal connections with professional social workers. This includes personal email or text messages, as well as direct

social media messages on FaceBook or Instagram to connect with a larger network of social workers. Since the United States is currently experiencing a pandemic, data collection followed social distancing guidelines and took place via a video or phone call using Zoom and FaceTime, depending on the preferences of individual participants. Once participants agreed to volunteer in the study, they received an email containing information on the purpose of the study and an IRB approved informed consent form which they signed with an X in order to maintain anonymity.

The interviews took place from December 2020 to February 2021. Scheduling for these interviews was very flexible to the schedules of social workers. Once an interview was scheduled, the researcher provided the participants a copy of informed consent. During the individual interviews, the researcher reminded the participants that they will be audio recorded and began to record the audio with their cellular device. Once the interview was concluded, the researcher transferred the audio recording onto the appropriate drive and erased the original recording to ensure security of the material. In preparation for data analysis, the interviews were transcribed using an online transcription provider; Temi. Once the transcriptions were finished, the researcher verified the transcription's validity and began to look for emerging themes.

Protection of Human Subjects

The voluntary participants for this study received debriefing statements that informed them of the purpose of the study, risks and benefits, informed consent and consent to be audio recorded. Participants were notified of their right to discontinue participation in the study at any time with no given consequences.

In order to ensure confidentiality of all participants, personally identifiable information was not solicited or shared. Consent forms were marked with an X to determine they have been read thoroughly by each participant while maintaining anonymity. Interview recordings and transcriptions were stored on a 2-step verification, password protected Google account with the sole purpose of this research project. Upon completion of the research analysis, the Google account and all information will be securely erased.

Data Analysis

Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed using a secure online transcription company, Temi, in order to ensure confidentiality and accuracy of the interviews. Upon receiving the transcriptions, the researcher began to analyze the data using an inductive approach of thematic analysis. The researcher immersed herself in the data and began by assigning codes to main points found in each interview. The researcher reviewed the transcriptions once more to clarify the codes which will be grouped into themes. The themes are dissected and defined in the analysis chapter of the research.

Summary

This chapter presented the methodology to be conducted in the study. The qualitative individual interview design allowed the researcher to collect information of the experiences and perceptions social workers have in regard to supporting foster youth in obtaining post-secondary education. The interviews followed an interview guide with open-ended questions that allowed social workers to really share their experiences in depth. Also discussed in this chapter were the steps the researcher took to protect the voluntary participants' confidential information during and after the research. Lastly, this chapter provided insight into the qualitative data analysis of this study.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

In this chapter, demographics of the participants and findings derived from interviews with the social workers will be presented. Also included in the chapter are the major themes that were identified from the data, according to the questions that were asked. Incorporated among the major findings will be social worker's perceived barriers to achieving successful post-foster care.

Presentation of the Findings

Demographics

The study sample included six individuals practicing social work in a child welfare agency in Southern and Northern California. Of this sample, there were five women (83%) and one man (17%) in the study. Of the participants, 83% were Hispanic or Latino and 17% was African American. The median age of participants was 30 years old. The youngest participant was 24 years old and the oldest participant was 54 years old. Three of the participants were between ages 24-29, two participants were between ages 31-41, and one participant was 54 years old.

Four participants (67%) reported completing a Master's degree in social work, and two participants (33%) completed a Bachelor's degree in social work. Two of the participants (33%) have worked in the field of child welfare for about

one and a half years, another two participants (33%) have worked for four to five years, one participant (17%) has worked for six years, and another participant (17%) has worked for twenty years.

When the participants were asked about the type of their work experiences with foster youth, the responses were mixed. At least three participants reported they are intake social workers, indicating that they assess homes on an initial or investigative basis and typically work with foster youth for a short amount of time, or before they have officially entered the foster system. One participant mentioned they work directly with foster youth, in a unit within a child welfare agency called Extended Foster Care. Another participant was a case-carrying and adoptions social worker. One participant reported having their Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW) certification.

Perceptions of Foster Youth Goals

Participants were asked to detail some of the educational or professional goals that have been expressed by transition-aged youth they have encountered. Two of the social workers mentioned that in their experiences, youth members might not have a focus on higher education, instead there is an increased focus on the “here and now”. This may consist of short-term goals such as obtaining a job or graduating from high school. Three of the participants mentioned particular actions in assessing foster youth’s goals, such as connecting a youth member to services, conducting a transitional independent living plan, or having a talk with youth members to inform them of resources available. Another participant

mentioned that different levels of resiliency have an effect on foster youths' goals and overall sense of purpose. "Sometimes we see kids who would take all that they have experienced and turn it into motivation to do well in school, despite their circumstances. And then you have others who just cannot manage their circumstances that are so overwhelmed by it" (Participant Six, February 2021). One participant mentioned that barriers to foster youths' goals are lack of support, instability in schools, and once again the focus of obtaining a job to support their basic needs like food and shelter (Participant Two, February 2021).

Knowledge of Resources

Participants were asked to share their knowledge of resources available to youth who are at the age of transition. Three of the participants mentioned the Independent Living Program (ILP) as one of the resources which they typically refer their youth members to participate in. The participants mentioned different areas ILP assists foster youth in, such as how to fill out college applications, the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), as well as living skills like how to budget or find their own housing. Participant Three said, "They [ILP] prepare them for school as well as their basic needs." One worker mentioned that they typically receive information on resources available to foster youth to their designated county emails.

As a follow-up to the previous question, participants were asked of their knowledge on programs or financial awards that support foster youth specifically. One participant shared they receive information on programs directly from local

community and public college campuses and specified the importance of maintaining relationships with those stakeholders. Two participants mentioned the Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS). Three participants answered that they did not have any knowledge pertaining to foster-youth specific programs. One of the participants mentioned a career institute to connect youth to opportunities for employment, as well as educational liaisons available through the transitional living program in their county. Another participant mentioned a foster youth specific grant within FAFSA, as well as foster youth advocates available to assist youth or families in their county.

Perceived Barriers for Foster Youth

One of the participants identified the following barriers: lack of motivation, amount of time they spent in foster care, diminished family connections or support networks, and the idea that they do not have the appropriate resources to go to college. Another barrier identified was the high caseloads assigned to social workers. Two participants explained that social workers are not able to spend the extra time necessary to sit down and detail the resources available or provide encouragement. A participant mentioned another barrier to the utilization of these programs was foster youth resistance. The participant described this resistance as not wanting to be labeled foster youth. Another perceived obstacle is the financial burden that comes with school. Resilience was also mentioned as a factor that affects foster youth, emphasizing the importance of connecting youth to resources available to help meet their needs and more. Participant Two

included factors such as mental health and wellbeing as another barrier for foster youth. Participant Two mentioned that the trauma that some of the children have endured has the ability to affect their mental health and functioning.

Social Workers' Steps of Action

When participants were asked to detail the actions they take to support foster youth, the answers were very diversified. One of the participants disclosed having an individual conversation with their youth members as they get ready to reach the age of emancipation, including the encouragement of furthering their education as opposed to only joining the workforce. Participant Two stated that they are not a “hand-holder”, and instead prefer to give youth the task of connecting with a school’s educational liaison. “They [youth] need to learn how to communicate with a person in a professional field, to ask for the guidance. It’s good [for them] to get to know the environment or where they are at” (Participant Two, February 2021). Two of the intake workers acknowledged that the best way in which they support foster youth is by connecting them to the services, resources, or programs they may need to support their basic needs and long-term goals. The case-carrying social worker detailed their steps, which included sitting down with their transition-aged youth and ensuring that they have items necessary for life after foster care, such as their California Identification, birth certificate, and social security number. If the young adults do not have these items, the social worker makes that a goal for the youth along with a projected deadline for added accountability. Two of the participants recounted instances

where they provided foster youths on their caseloads a visit to a local college campus in support of their goals.

If someone expressed an interest in going to church, because they had a different religion, I would find a way to get them there or personally take them so that they can have experiences outside of the foster care system, to have exposure to what is possible to them. (Participant 6, February 2021)

Social Workers' Recommendations

To conclude the interviews, each participant was asked questions regarding their ideas or recommendations to facilitate support to foster youth. Some of the participants offered various responses to the question. At least two of the participants identified that reducing social worker's caseloads would allow social workers the ability to provide individualized support and necessary encouragement to youth. Four of the participants responded that it would be beneficial to provide knowledge to foster parents as part of the training process if they have youth in their care who are near the age of transition. Three of the participants articulated there should be an added factor of accountability for social workers to have conversations about goals and provide information regarding available resources. "They [social workers] can work together to bridge the gap between what foster youth and foster parents know" (Participant 6, February 2021). One participant discussed the responsibility of continuing a youth's financial assistance or housing opportunities, especially for those who

are pursuing their educational goals. The participant added that the responsibility should fall on the education system or the child welfare agency. Two of the participants expressed a need for an increase in communication and collaboration with every individual assigned to the same case. One of the participants suggested utilizing a Child and Family Team Meeting (CFTM) in order to ensure foster youth members are on educationally on track beginning in high school; as well as creating a plan, designating specific tasks and deadlines to work towards their goals. Participant Five urged the importance of providing culturally competent support to foster youth. Another participant recommended meeting with other counties in order to gain knowledge of the resources they use as well as ideas they may have on how to implement the support. One participant noted the responsibility of high school counselors to also be aware of resources since they typically have daily access to students, inclusive of those who are a part of the foster system.

Summary

The interviews conducted allowed social workers to describe their typical practice experiences with foster youth. The major topics presented included demographics, perceptions of foster youth goals, knowledge of resources, perceived barriers, and social workers' individual practices in regard to providing support to foster youth. Social work participants also provided their own recommendations on how to better advocate for youth within the foster system.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Introduction

This chapter will discuss the major findings of the study presented in the previous chapter. In addition, this chapter will further consider the perceptions of social workers on providing support or guidance to foster youth, in relation to the hypothesis and research pertaining to this study. Furthermore, this chapter will explore the strengths and limitations of this study as well as formal recommendations for social work practice, policy, and research. This chapter will conclude with a summary of findings.

Discussion

This research study had the stated purpose to examine the experiences and perceptions of social workers in working with foster youth and supporting them in achieving success post-dependency. The major findings highlighted in this study illustrate varying modes of practice depending on the individual's position within a child welfare agency.

One of the major findings in the study highlighted the perception that foster youth's goals many times included short-term goals such as graduating high school or finding a job. Their focus or priority in some cases does not stretch beyond short-term goals or making sure their basic needs are met first. Another factor, which affects the short-term goals of foster youth members, was

recognized to be placement instability. This finding is consistent with the data which identified some of the barriers that stem from the foster care system. The article by Courtney et al. (2016) emphasized that one of the main barriers to education is foster youth's placement instability.

Another key finding derived from the interviews in the study is that knowledge and availability of resources to foster youth vary widely among the participants depending on many factors. One factor that affects the knowledge of resources is a social worker's position within the child welfare agency. Intake social workers were not able to name programs due to the fact that they are not typically the ones to distribute information of this nature. However, the worker who works more closely with foster youth in a specialized position has more knowledge of resources available to foster youth. Another factor impacting the spread of knowledge is the location of the agency, and the collaborations which that agency is a part of. The lack of an internal database or guidance of information creates a discrepancy between the services that are offered and the utilization of these services. This information is consistent with the previous literature which identified a gap in the usage of foster-youth specific programs (Whitman, 2018).

A key barrier in providing support to foster youth identified in the study was the large case load sizes social workers are faced with at a public child welfare agency. Social workers identified the time constraints that are emphasized with the influx of clients on their caseloads. Some participants

described carrying as many as 30 cases, which includes multiple children and adults per case. Due to factors such as time constraints, workers are not able to dedicate much time to each client. Instead, the focus is set on factors that may mitigate immediate safety of their clients. Many participants mentioned that reduced caseload sizes would allow social workers to work better with their clients, and especially foster youth. More time with foster youth would allow social workers to have more intimate discussions with them regarding factors that may affect their future success, instead of focusing on the here-and-now.

Limitations

One limitation of this study is the limited number of participants included in the sample size of six. This sample size may not properly represent all social workers in child welfare. In terms of demographics, the sample only included one participant who was identified as male. Accordingly, this study does not represent an accurate representation of male social workers in child welfare. Another limitation is that some of the participants revealed they only worked with foster youth sparingly. The study should have set a requirement as to the type of social workers eligible to participate in the study in order to maximize the amount of workers who work directly with foster youth. The feedback from this sample may not accurately represent that of the majority of social workers who work in a role of support to foster youth directly. Another limitation of this study is that it does not include the actual perspectives of foster youth enduring these challenges.

Instead, the study offers the perspectives of social workers who have varied levels of working with foster youth members.

Strengths

Strengths of this study include the depth in responses the participants were able to provide. Despite varying number of years of experience or levels of collaboration with foster youth, the social worker participants in the study were able to provide information pertinent to understanding some of the many implications that may affect foster youth's access to higher education. Furthermore, the social worker participants also offered valuable recommendations based on their areas of practice and their experiences with foster youth.

Recommendations for Social Work Practice, Policy, and Research

This research study provided an internal perspective of current practice within the child welfare system. The findings from this study have the potential to influence recommendations to help bridge the gap between foster youth and their educational attainment. This process begins with an improvement in areas such as social work practice, policy formulation, and research.

Practice

Throughout the interviews, it was noted that most, if not all, social workers mentioned the importance of taking the extra time to sit down with their youth members to have a conversation about their futures. Regardless of the social

worker's position within the agency, it is important they take the time to acknowledge and remind foster youth members that they are capable of achieving success. It may be beneficial for child welfare agencies to implement an added area of focus to provide foster youth support and knowledge in planning for their futures and hold accountability at every level. It is evident that even the simple act of having a conversation about education or future plans encourages foster youth to achieve their higher educational goals.

Policy

A common recommendation derived from the interviews called for action from child welfare agencies to provide social workers with supplemental training on how to better support foster youth in preparation for education or other goals. It would be beneficial for a national system to provide an emphasis on the importance of setting and attaining more long-term goals with foster youth. Many of the social work participants had a limited knowledge base of programs and support for youth in the foster system. A recommendation to improve this outcome is to develop a national database of information accessible to social workers and foster youth members.

Another common theme identified in the study was the severe time constraints of social workers due to high caseloads. Social work participants in the study mentioned not having enough time to sit down and really discuss goals with foster youth. It is reasonable to infer that lower caseload sizes would allow social workers to spend more individual time with their clients. It is recommended

that policy makers take into account the number of cases a social worker is expected to carry. This recommendation has the potential to not only improve factors related to educational success, but also success factors related to child welfare outcomes.

Research

Currently, there is a lack of research focused on the actions of social workers in the area of supporting foster youth to achieve higher education. Many scholarly articles instead focus on the adverse effects of not providing additional support to foster youth. It is recommended that more research be conducted to evaluate different areas that can be improved within the field of child welfare. Specifically, it would be of advantage to focus on child welfare workers who have a direct role in working with foster youth and specifically their goals. This population could provide more knowledge on perceived barriers to achieving educational success for foster youth within the child welfare system.

Another area of research that would be beneficial is discovering why foster youth do not utilize some of the programs that are available to them. As mentioned before, there is a discrepancy in the utilization of existing programs available to foster youth. Research of this nature would be impactful to the development of future programs and increasing the utilization of programs already in place.

Conclusion

This qualitative research study was performed in order to assess social worker's perceptions related to the role of support they provide youth and young adults in the public child welfare system. Specifically, social work participants discussed their role surrounding the goal of post-secondary education. The study found that social workers in California support youth in different ways depending on their role within the agency. Another barrier encountered was social worker's high caseloads which participants explained did not allow them the time to be the role of support a youth member may need. Analysis of the study suggests that social workers taking the time to ask foster youth about their goals has the potential to instill the hope of post-secondary education. The hope of this study is to guide areas of social work policy, practice, and research in an area that continues to be a struggle for youth in the child welfare system.

APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW GUIDE

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Instructions: Please provide a response to the following questions:

1. What is your age?
2. What is your gender?
 - a. Male
 - b. Female
 - c. Non-binary
 - d. Prefer to self-explain:
 - e. Prefer not to say
3. What is your race/ethnicity?
 - a. White
 - b. Hispanic or Latino
 - c. Black or African American
 - d. Native American or American Indian
 - e. Asian / Pacific Islander
 - f. Other
4. What is your highest level of education completed or in progress?
 - a. High School
 - b. Associates Degree
 - c. Bachelor's Degree
 - d. Graduate Degree
 - e. Doctorate/PhD

INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Tell me about your educational and professional background.
 - a. Years working in the field of child welfare?
2. Tell me about your experiences working with foster youth.
 - a. What are some of their educational/professional goals?
3. What are some resources available for foster youth seeking post-secondary education or training?
 - a. High school programs?
 - b. University programs?
4. Are you aware of any programs that support foster youth specifically?
 - a. Financial awards/assistance?
5. Is there an instance when you took any extra steps to support a youth in obtaining information?

Ex: plan a college visit.
6. What more can be done for foster youth seeking post-secondary education?
 - a. By agencies?
 - b. By social workers?
 - c. By foster parents?
 - d. By schools?
7. What other recommendations do you have that would facilitate support to foster youth?

APPENDIX B
INFORMED CONSENT

INFORMED CONSENT

The study in which you are asked to participate is designed to examine social workers perceptions of their role in supporting foster youth to pursue higher education. The study is being conducted by Marielena Lozano, MSW student under the supervision of Dr. Janet Chang, professor in the 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 this study is to examine social workers' experiences and steps of action taken in support of foster youth obtaining post-secondary education.

DESCRIPTION: Volunteer participants will be asked a few general demographic information at the beginning of the interview, followed by some questions that will prompt conversation regarding foster youth and educational attainment.

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

CONFIDENTIALITY: Your responses will remain confidential. Your name will not be used in the report of findings.

DURATION: The interview will take approximately 30 minutes to complete.

RISKS: Risk foreseen in relation to this study may be subject to your personal level of comfort in answering interview questions. However, if a question has made you feel uncomfortable, feel free to skip the question or discontinue the interview at any time.

BENEFITS: The findings of this research have the potential to improve the gap in achievement of higher education by foster youth, bettering the statistics for this population. You will also be provided an online gift card to Amazon upon completion of the interview.

CONTACT: If you have any questions about this study, feel free to contact Dr. Chang at (909) 537-5184.

RESULTS: Results of this study can be obtained from the Pfau Library ScholarWorks database (<http://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/>) at California State University, San Bernardino after June 2021.

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

(Place an X on this line)

Date

I agree to have this interview be audio recorded: _____ YES _____ NO

APPENDIX C
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL



December 1, 2020

CSUSB INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

Administrative/Exempt Review Determination

Status: Determined Exempt

IRB-FY2021-102

Janet Chang Marielena Lozano
CSBS - Social Work
California State University, San Bernardino
5500 University Parkway
San Bernardino, California 92407

Dear Janet Chang Marielena Lozano:

Your application to use human subjects, titled "Bridging the gap between foster youth and education: perspectives of social workers" has been reviewed and determined exempt by the Chair of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of CSU, San Bernardino. An exempt determination means your study had met the federal requirements for exempt status under 45 CFR 46.104. The CSUSB IRB has not evaluated your proposal for scientific merit, except to weigh the risk and benefits of the study to ensure the protection of human participants. Important Note: This approval notice does not replace any departmental or additional campus approvals which may be required including access to CSUSB campus facilities and affiliate campuses due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Visit the Office of Academic Research website for more information at <https://www.csusb.edu/academic-research>.

You are required to notify the IRB of the following as mandated by the Office of Human Research Protections (OHRP) federal regulations 45 CFR 46 and CSUSB IRB policy. The forms (modification, renewal, unanticipated/adverse event, study closure) are located in the Cayuse IRB System with instructions provided on the IRB Applications, Forms, and Submission webpage. Failure to notify the IRB of the following requirements may result in disciplinary action. The Cayuse IRB system will notify you when your protocol is due for renewal. Ensure you file your protocol renewal and continuing review form through the Cayuse IRB system to keep your protocol current and active unless you have completed your study.

- Ensure your CITI Human Subjects Training is kept up-to-date and current throughout the study.
- Submit a protocol modification (change) if any changes (no matter how minor) are proposed in your study for review and approval by the IRB before being implemented in your study.
- Notify the IRB within 5 days of any unanticipated or adverse events are experienced by subjects during your research.
- Submit a study closure through the Cayuse IRB submission system once your study has ended.

If you have any questions regarding the IRB decision, please contact Michael Gillespie, the Research Compliance Officer. Mr. Michael Gillespie can be reached by phone at (909) 537-7588, by fax at (909) 537-7028, or by email

at mgillesp@csusb.edu. Please include your application approval number IRB-FY2021-102 in all correspondence. Any complaints you receive from participants and/or others related to your research may be directed to Mr. Gillespie.

Best of luck with your research.

Sincerely,

Nicole Dabbs

Nicole Dabbs, Ph.D., IRB Chair
CSUSB Institutional Review Board

ND/MG

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