

5-2023

Preserving Placement for Children with Behavioral Issues: A Qualitative Study of Child Welfare Social Workers in the United States

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PRESERVING PLACEMENT FOR CHILDREN WITH BEHAVIORAL ISSUES: A
QUALITATIVE STUDY OF CHILD WELFARE SOCIAL WORKERS IN THE
UNITED STATES

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
Jessica Quin
Tara Beam
May 2023

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ABSTRACT

Children in foster care experience complex trauma that puts them at risk for frequent placement changes. Such changes can have a negative impact on child welfare social workers' job performance. This exploratory study identified areas that need to be addressed for social workers to meet expectations for placement preservation. More specifically, this qualitative study explored the perceptions of child welfare social workers' competence and confidence regarding placement stability for foster children who have behavioral issues. Interviews were conducted with seven child welfare workers across three states: California, Nevada, and Texas (N = 7). Thematic analysis procedures revealed the following six themes: 1) long term commitment, 2) lack of readiness and training, 3) lack of knowledge on how to address challenges, 4) limited, reactive support, 5) several factors associated with lack of organizational support, and 6) various preferred services. The findings in the study have implications for social service organizations in that social workers can use this research to increase knowledge on ways to overcome the challenges faced when preserving placement for children with behavioral issues.

Keywords: placement preservation, children in foster care, trauma, child welfare workers, qualitative research, thematic analysis.

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CHAPTER ONE

PROBLEM FORMULATION

Children in the foster care system come from various backgrounds and experiences with trauma that put them at risk for frequent placement changes. Family separation and trauma have many long-lasting effects that can result in behavioral issues in children who are in the foster care system (Jacobsen et al., 2020). In turn, these behavioral issues can have a negative impact on permanency plans. According to the Children's Bureau's, Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) preliminary report, the number of children in the foster care system in the United States in 2019 was 423,997. While removal for these children is for various reasons, the data shows that 63% is for neglect, 34 % for drug abuse (by a parent), 13% for physical abuse, 4% for sexual abuse, and 8% for behavioral problems. Of these children, 5% of them have time in care for five years or more. Even more concerning is that 2% of these children are identified as long-term care in the foster care system. Although 2% may seem like a low number, it is equivalent to 7,398 children (Children's Bureau, 2020). Many of these children have experienced significant adversity prior to entering care, putting them at high risk for behavioral disturbances (Beyerlein et al., 2018). Behavioral issues continue to be an area of concern that can affect all aspects of their lives, including placement stability and permanency.

Attaining placement stability for children in foster care should be a priority for child welfare social workers. Children with behavioral disturbance are at an

even higher risk for placement changes than those who do not experience behavioral issues (Konijn et al., 2021). Each placement change can cause more compounding issues for the child and cause behaviors to escalate and/or arise when behaviors were not previously present. Securing the child's first placement is vital. Children in foster care who are moved prematurely from their first placement have a three-and-a-half times more likelihood that their subsequent placement will also be unsuccessful (Konijn et al., 2021).

Placement changes can have a negative impact on the social worker's practice due to the increase in job responsibilities. Placement changes can cause issues in job performance due to time constraints. Social workers may also feel that there is a lack of support from colleagues, supervisors and the organization. These impacts can affect job performance and the implementation of interventions. How a child welfare social worker perceives occupational support from colleagues, leadership, and the organization, plays a vital role in delivering services and overall job satisfaction. Perceived organizational support strongly affects role stress (Kim & Mor Barak, 2015). Role stress and lack of support can affect how intervention strategies are implemented.

Social workers have a set of policies that must be followed in their practice. The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (P. L. 105-89) was enacted to promote children's safety, permanency, and wellbeing in the foster care system. This act was implemented to eliminate delays when finding a permanent placement and hold child welfare agencies more accountable in this process. In

addition, the Safe and Timely Interstate Placement of Foster Children Act of 2006 (P. L. 109-239) was implemented to hold social workers accountable for finding placement for children in a safe but more timely manner across all states. Social workers are responsible for carrying out the expectations listed in these acts because those expectations are required when working in child welfare. Neither policy has a section discussing any training that is mandated for social workers in order for them to be successful when there is an issue with placement and an intervention is needed for preservation.

Behavioral issues complicate the purpose of these acts because when there is a need to sustain placement, there may be a lack of knowledge and/or support on how to successfully do so. In order for social workers to strive for permanency and attain placement stability for children in foster care, it is necessary to learn how to address behavioral issues adequately and implement the appropriate interventions. All County Letter (ACL) No. 19-26 mandated changes to Assembly Bill (AB) 2247, which included revisions for the placement preservation strategies and placement change requirements for foster youth. These changes require child welfare agencies to develop, implement, and document in the contact notes of the dependent foster youth's case a placement preservation strategy to preserve the dependent foster youth's placement prior to making a placement change (California Department of Social Services, 2019). Collaboration with the Child and Family Team (CFT) is required when developing a placement preservation plan and necessary before making a placement

change. The ACL states that it is desirable for social workers to use a trauma-informed approach alongside the strengths-based and solution-focused models. When children in foster care experience behavioral issues, it becomes particularly crucial that their social workers and the support system are well trained on trauma-informed care or strength-based models. However, neither AB2247 nor ACL No.19-26 provides specific guidance or training requirements for social workers to be sufficient in carrying out the expectations laid out in these policies.

Per the Child Welfare Training Regulations in the State of California, child welfare social workers and supervisors are required to participate in forty hours of continuous training every two years in order to strengthen their skills and make sure their practice is up to par. Six of those hours should be dedicated to the practice component that the Integrated Core Practice Model (ICPM) decides on for that year. All County Letter No. 21-129 states that there is an amendment attempting to modify the requirement to twenty hours annually rather than forty hours every two years. Although there is required training, there may be a lack of training focusing on the preservation of placement for children with behavioral issues, thus resulting in social workers not feeling competent when needing to save a placement. Annual training should be required on interventions and techniques, such as crisis intervention, de-escalation tactics, trauma-informed practice, solution-focused approaches, and techniques of that nature. Essentially, without consistent and proper training on how to implement evidence-based

practice (EBP) to preserve placement for different situations, it may become difficult for social workers to decrease the number of placement changes a child may have because of the child's behavioral issues.

Permanency Planning involves decisive, time-limited, goal-oriented activities to maintain children within their families of origin or place them with other permanent families (California Department of Social Services, n.d.). Social workers hold a significant role in this process, for it is their job to secure permanency regardless of what caused the notice of removal, unless the child's safety and wellbeing is at risk. Typically, social workers have a wide range of knowledge and skills. Still, social workers may feel there has not been sufficient training or adequate support from their organization to work with children with behavioral issues and support families who care for them. Studies show that social workers that understand the pervasiveness and impact of trauma across the life span will deliver services through a trauma-informed lens and improved practice (Levinson, 2017). Researching this topic could potentially benefit the future of upcoming social workers and social workers already in the field. This topic could help identify the areas that need to be addressed in order for social workers to meet the expectations for placement preservation. This research could guide agencies to provide more initial training on placement preservation strategies. The overall goal is to decrease the number of placements for children in foster care. This study seeks to answer the following questions regarding social workers in child welfare: 1) What challenges do child welfare social

workers face in securing placement stability for children with behavioral issues?

2) What organizational support or training do child welfare social workers receive in helping them address those challenges? 3) How effective are those supports or trainings for child welfare social workers to address placement stability issues among children with behavioral issues?

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter will discuss and explore relevant research on the importance of social workers' competency and confidence in implementing evidence-based practice (EBP) when preserving placements for foster children with behavioral disturbances. Placement stability and permanency is the primary goal to secure stability and family connection for children in the foster care system. The following subsections will explore placement changes, including causality and implications and social workers' role competency and self-efficacy when applying EBP to preserve placement. The final section will discuss the theories guiding conceptualization associated with the issue of placement disruptions and the perception of competence in social work.

Causality and Implications of Placement Disruptions

Placement disruptions continue to be a challenging area for child welfare social workers. Stable placement for children is imperative for their social and emotional development. Placement instability impacts a child's behavioral health significantly. Children with multiple placements are at higher risks for behavioral problems and show a 63% increase in behavioral issues due to instability alone (Rubin et al., 2007). When a foster family has given a notice to remove a child from their care, many variables are considered. In a matched sample study, Koh

et al. (2014) attempted to explain the leading causes of placement changes and what characteristics are the main factors in placement instability with children in the foster care system. It was found that most placement changes are due to "foster family-related or child behavior-related reasons over time" (Koh et al., 2014, para. 50). In child behavior-related placement disruptions, 83.3% of foster parents requested a removal of the child from their care and cited the removal as issues associated with a child's behavior (Koh et al., 2014). A child's behaviors seem to be the most significant concern in placement changes.

Behavior disturbances are not only a risk factor for placement changes, but placement changes also increase a child's risk for behavioral disturbances. Behavioral issues can be both the cause and the effect of placement changes. These two issues impact each other and affect the overall wellbeing of the child. The consequences of placement changes interfere with and impede a child's ability to form healthy family bonds and foster close relationships with their caretakers. Placement changes also affect a child's physical and mental development. A meta-analytic review of foster care placement instability shows that children with behavioral issues are at the highest risk for externalizing problems in placement (Konijn et al., 2019). In the same study they also found that externalizing behaviors put more stress on the caretaker, and the consequence of this stress can lead to placement changes, further exacerbating the issue. Knowing that behavioral issues increase a child's risk for placement changes and that placement changes increase a child's risk for behavioral

issues, social workers must have the training and support to feel competent in intervention strategies to address behavioral issues and support families.

The professional dynamics of the relationship between social workers and foster families is crucial to preserving placement for a child. Families may feel there is a lack of support, resources, and training from the agency. In a systematic literature review of foster and adoptive caregiver factors for increasing placement stability and permanency, Vanderwill et al. (2021) found that one of the two main factors attributing to placement instability is access to support systems. Since not all foster families have access to a support system, this places the responsibility on child welfare agencies to develop and build trusting, supportive relationships with foster families. It is also the responsibility of child welfare agencies to provide social workers training to help develop these relationships, improve communication, and provide support to the foster families (Vanderwill et al., 2021). In some cases, caretakers do not feel they have enough support and training to deal with behavioral issues with a child. Social workers may feel that not having enough training and support affects their ability to provide appropriate interventions and trauma-informed care to help preserve placement.

Self-Efficacy, Support, and Role Competence, in Using Evidence Based Practice

Social work is a field that does not always show immediate results when implementing services and interventions. Social workers may struggle to see how

their services improve outcomes for clients. There is empirical evidence that social support from coworkers can be a "buffer" to the damaging effect of heavy workload and work-related stress (Koeske & Koeske, 1989). This same study also discussed how the amount of time spent on direct social work practice and short-term crisis interventions can also be identified as low support pressures that can increase stress levels and result in poor self-efficacy (Koeske & Koeske, 1989, pp. 4-5). When dealing with children in the foster care system who have behavioral issues and the family has given notice for a placement change, this can become an area of concern. Social workers may begin to feel that their interventions and practice are ineffective in preserving placements. Social support can also be viewed in terms of training and supportive approaches that the agency provides. A work environment that focuses on being socially supportive may improve social work interventions by providing EBP that is grounded in theoretical frameworks. This may improve trauma-informed practice and crisis interventions for children with behavioral issues and their families while improving self-efficacy and overall outcomes.

The level of self-efficacy that social workers in child welfare services have is vital to their success when implementing EBP when working with children, youth, and families to ensure placement stability. Levels of self-efficacy can be increased by providing child welfare social workers training and exposure to different approaches to increase their level of confidence and competence in applying EBP models in their practice (Shapiro, 2020). Some EBP models

commonly used in child welfare are the crisis intervention model and trauma-informed care. Exposure to different approaches to practice will increase comfort levels when using those models and approaches in attempting to preserve a placement for a child or youth with behavioral issues.

Child welfare social workers take on many roles when working with clients and a social workers self-perception in these roles can affect the implementation of interventions. Literature on social work role competence suggests that there is an insufficient amount of information and direction on how to implement the principles of theory and framework into practice. There is also a lack of information on existing quantifiable steps that assist in creating a trauma-informed lens in social work practice (Kerns et al., 2016). This lack of knowledge can cause issues in role competence, as social workers may be unclear on how to implement these frameworks to practice. If there is a lack of understanding on how to apply the various frameworks for practice, complications may arise when working with children in the foster care system who are experiencing behavioral issues that are disrupting their placement.

Gaps in the Literature

After reviewing much of the literature and research regarding behavioral issues for children in the foster care system, interventions, and placement stability, there seems to be a disconnect as to what specific interventions and trainings are used to prevent placement disruptions. The available research does not give one specific strategy or intervention that improves placement stability for

children. The available research and data are ambiguous and do not provide exact steps on attaining placement stability for children (Carnochan et al., 2013). There also appears to be much literature about the effects of placement changes, analytic reviews regarding the implementation of services for both the child and the foster families, but little research on the ways in which a child welfare social worker can increase placement stability and successfully preserve a placement when needed. There does not appear to be a clear direction on what framework or training yields the best results in attaining placement stability. Therefore, this study may help identify the areas in child welfare practice that need to be evaluated in order to increase placement stability outcomes.

Theories Guiding Conceptualization

Social workers who are practicing in the field of public child welfare must be competent in working with children through a trauma-informed lens. It is essential that their theoretical foundation is focused on EBP, including trauma-informed care. A child welfare system that is not trauma-informed likely misunderstands the child's experience from the child's view of the world (Richardson et al., 2012). Children in foster placement may suffer from complex trauma. The trauma from family separation and the experiences leading to removal all factor into the complexity of their trauma and can cause behavioral disturbances and placement disruption. Placement disruptions may further perpetuate trust and mistrust and compromise bonds and attachments with caretakers. These issues can have a negative impact on how a child responds to

treatment and interventions. The child needs a safe place to process their trauma to have successful outcomes in treatment (Kimberley & Parsons, 2017, p. 539). Appropriate training for social workers in providing trauma-informed treatment and complex trauma-informed interventions is imperative in preserving placements. Not only is the training necessary, but the social worker must also be knowledgeable and competent in understanding the complexity of trauma and how to provide appropriate interventions for children and foster families.

The social cognitive theory of self-regulation is a theory that describes the interpersonal dynamics and interactions between people, their behaviors, and their environment. This theory looks at how individuals use self-influence to dictate their confidence in doing or using something in their life. The social cognitive theory of self-regulation is imperative to consider when looking at how child welfare social workers approach their practice. This theory applies to child welfare social workers in terms of their preparedness to implement EBP. In fact, social workers' inner dialogue may prevent them from using methods related to EBP. Through observing others (e.g., coworkers) and participating in training, social workers can obtain new skills and model those behaviors in their practice. Beliefs are formed based on what people's perception of their capabilities. Often, people anticipate the likely consequences of future actions, set goals for themselves, and plan courses of action that are likely to produce desired outcomes (Bandura, 1991, p.1). Social workers may feel unprepared to preserve placement. Still, implementing EBP is a skill that requires practice over time

through experience, including observation of other practitioners and the support of their colleagues. Encouraging and training social workers to set goals and use techniques that will produce desirable outcomes when preserving placement for children and youth with behavioral issues may increase the rate at which EBP are implemented.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

This study will seek to describe the perception of child welfare social workers' competence and confidence when needing to attain placement stability for children in the foster care system who have behavioral issues. This study will assist in determining if training and organizational support has an impact on child welfare social workers' level of competence and confidence when carrying out the expectations of preserving placement. This study will also identify how child welfare social workers' feel about the training received, learned intervention strategies, and support from the organization and if those factors have an impact on the ability to preserve placement. This chapter will include details on how this study will be conducted and will consist of the study's design, sampling, data collection and instruments, procedures, protection of human subjects, and data analysis.

Study Design

The purpose of this study is to identify and explain the relationship between training, organizational support, and confidence in using EBP models to attain placement stability for children in the foster care system that have behavioral issues. This study is an exploratory study, as there is limited literature and research on specific strategies to preserve placement or steps on how child

welfare workers should address this issue. This research project used qualitative methods, and as a result it may present different challenges child welfare social workers face in preserving placement for children with behavioral issues.

Using an exploratory, qualitative method, allowed the researchers to examine how social workers perceive the training and support in implementing EBP when preserving placement for children with behavioral issues. In this study researchers conducted interviews that identified themes associated with whether social workers' feel competent and confident in preserving placement and if training and organizational support has played a role in the participants ability to implement EBP. Social workers had different perceptions on the effectiveness of the training and how it impacts practice. The interviews provided more personable and detailed information regarding the factors that play a role in the use of EBP when preserving placement for children with behavioral issues.

The limitations of using qualitative interviewing are that by doing in person interviews, there is less anonymity which can cause a barrier when recruiting participants. Qualitative interviews can generate less participants and therefore make the findings less generalizable (Grinnell & Unrau, 2018, pp. 462-516). Interviews are more time consuming and less accessible which may deter people from wanting to participate in the study. The interviewers must stay neutral to minimize biases for the participants when asking the interview questions. Participants may feel uneasy answering questions about confidence,

competence, and organizational support, which can lead to more socially desirable responses.

Sampling

This study employed the non-probability sampling method of snowball to recruit participants. All participants were current employees of a child welfare agency or previously an employee of a child welfare agency with at least one year experience in the field. Permission from the agency was not necessary since the county and/or agency will be anonymous. One of the inclusion criteria for this study is that the participating social workers must be working in child welfare and have experience working with placement preservation for children with behavioral issues. Social workers who are not currently working in child welfare but have worked to preserve placement for children with behavioral issues for a minimum of one year are also eligible. The exclusion criteria for this study is that social workers with less than one year of exposure to child welfare practice may lack the necessary experience to answer this study's interview questions. It is important to note that a degree in social work is not required to participate in this study. Although the goal was to recruit 20 participants, the final sample in this study is made of 7 respondents (N = 7).

Data Collection and Instruments

A qualitative approach was used for this study by conducting virtual interviews using the Zoom platform. The interviews were audio and video recorded with the use of closed captioning for transcribing purposes. Prior to the participants scheduled interview, a Zoom link was provided via email along with the informed consent. The Zoom interview began with an introduction where the researchers will explain the purpose and description of the study that the child welfare social workers will be participating in. The researchers obtained verbal consent and inquired about demographic information. The demographic information that was included is ethnicity, age, gender identity, type of degree, and number of years in child welfare practice. The researchers used open-ended questions to explore and obtain the necessary information to answer this study's research questions. The questions asked during the interview are provided in Appendix A.

Procedures

In order to recruit participants for this study, fliers were made that give a brief description of the study, the intended outcomes, and the importance of child welfare workers participation. The study's inclusion and exclusion criteria was included on the flier. The fliers were posted on social media platforms, such as Facebook pages where the audience is predominantly social workers. Each participant was interviewed separately.

Participants were able to sign up for interviews by expressing their interest in the study through email. Once a social worker reached out to participate in the study, a list of appointment days and times were emailed to the participant so that they could sign up for the interview. The researchers sent the informed consent via email and assigned each individual a randomized number. The interviewers ensured that recording and closed captioning was on and the participants were notified via zoom announcement that the recording is in progress and were prompted to consent to the zoom recording. At the conclusion of each interview, participants were thanked for the contribution to the research study. The researchers asked the participant to share the flier with colleagues who meet the inclusion criteria with the intention of recruiting more participants.

Protection of Human Subjects

Researchers sought and received permission to conduct this study from the California State University San Bernardino Institutional Review Board (IRB#: FY2022-222). The letter of approval can be seen in Appendix B. In order to ensure confidentiality for each participant in the study, there was a password required to enter the zoom meeting. All zoom meetings were recorded using the record to the cloud feature, which stored the interviews in the universities secure server. The participants were instructed to not disclose personal or identifying information during the interview. Participants were required to give verbal consent to move forward with the interview. The demographic surveys, recorded interviews, and transcripts, were stored in the secure server provided by the

university. The university provided server is double password protected through the MyCoyote login and the Weblogon identification feature. All of the information on the university google drive and cloud will be disposed of once the study is completed.

Data Analysis

The data that is collected through the transcript provided by zoom was analyzed by the researchers using the closed captioning feature alongside the recorded interviews. A written format was used for study purposes. This process was done by downloading the transcripts and assuring that the closed captioning matches the verbiage on the recorded interviews. Both researchers reviewed the corrections to ensure that there were no additional errors when comparing the closed captioning to the recordings. The researchers used thematic analysis to analyze their qualitative data. Thematic analysis consists of 6 major phases. The steps are familiarization with collected data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and presenting and discussing results. This research analysis method is the most popular strategy for qualitative research (Labra et.al., 2019). The transcripts were reviewed by both researchers two times so that a sufficient level of confidence was reached to ensure all themes and trends were clearly identified.

Participants were assigned a random number after providing verbal consent to ensure that the participants identity was concealed and to alleviate

any potential biases during the transcribing process. Non-verbal communication was documented and notes were taken on the interpretation of the non-verbal communication as it applied to the research study. The researchers also made note of any long pauses, hesitancy to answer, anxious behaviors, and requested breaks.

Summary

The following study examined how confident social workers working for a child welfare agency feel or felt in their ability to attain placement stability for children with behavioral issues. An additional number of factors were observed, such as social workers' perception of their role competence, self-efficacy, and organizational support when implementing EBP to preserve placements. The interviews conducted assisted in gathering the necessary information to identify if there are any challenges that social workers face when preserving placement and if organizational support and training play a role. The social workers level of competence and confidence when implementing EBP for children with behavioral issues was observed. For this process, a qualitative approach best suited the research that was done for this study.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Frequency Distributions

Table 1 provides demographic information about the study participants. This study includes 7 participants. Almost half of them (42.9%) identified as white. A similar proportion of the sample (42.9%) identified as black. In terms of age, more than half of the study respondents (57.1%) were under 40. The remaining participants (42.9%) were over the age of 40. Regarding gender, the vast majority of participants (85.7%) reported being female, with just one respondent (14.3%) identifying as male. From an educational perspective, the sample consisted mostly of participants with a graduate degree (85.7%). The rest of the sample (14.3%) had an undergraduate degree. In terms of profession, the participants came from a variety of disciplines, with social work making up almost half of the sample (42.9%). Psychology, sociology, human development/family studies, and public administration constitute the rest of the sample. Finally, approximately three quarters of the sample (71.4%) had over 5 years of child welfare experience.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of the Sample (N=7)

Variables	N	%
Race/Ethnicity		

White	3	42.9
Black	3	42.9
Hispanic	1	14.3
Age		
Under 40	4	57.1
Over 40	3	42.9
Gender		
Male	1	14.3
Female	6	85.7
Education Level		
Bachelor's Degree	1	14.3
Master's Degree	6	85.7
Discipline		
Social Work	3	42.9
Sociology	1	14.3
Psychology	1	14.3
Human Development/ Family Studies	1	14.3
Public Administration	1	14.3
Years in Child Welfare		
Under 5 Years	2	28.6
Over 5 Year	5	71.4

Findings

Table 2 displays the themes found in this study. There are six themes that emerged from the thematic analysis: long term commitment, lack of readiness and training, lack of knowledge on how to address challenges, limited, reactive support, several factors associated with lack of organizational support, and various preferred services. Each of these themes will be described below.

Table 2

Study Themes

Themes	Description
Theme 1	Long term commitment to Child Welfare practice.
Theme 2	Lack of readiness and training for Social Service Practitioners and foster parents in regards to preserving placement for children with behavioral issues.
Theme 3	Lack of knowledge on how to address the challenges in regards to preserving placement for children with behavioral issues.
Theme 4	Limited support that is reactive not proactive when preserving placement for children with behavioral issues.
Theme 5	Several factors associated with lack of organizational support as it pertains to preserving placement for children with behavioral issues.
Theme 6	Various recommended services on how to better preserve placement for children with behavioral issues.

Theme (1): Long term commitment. This theme describes how long the participants have been exposed to preserving placement for children with behavioral issues in child welfare practice. Almost all participants have had a long-term commitment to child welfare practice, citing 5 or more years in case management. Many of the participants have been in the field for a long period of time and have held a variety of position in child welfare practice. This shows that the participants have a long-term commitment to working with foster children who have behavioral issues. In that, the respondents have been exposed to the different needs that children with behavioral issues have in regards to preserving placement. Respondents express this feeling as follows:

Um, well, I started off as a children's services social worker for Riverside County, um, working with kids who have been abused and neglected. So of course, because of the trauma that they've been through, they have a variety of behavioral issues. And I was a caseworker from 2006 until 2015. Um, so during a monthly visit and just on day to day where I provided support to the foster homes, making referrals out for children who are experiencing behavioral issues, and trying to calm them down when they're in a crisis. Those type of experiences. [Participant #4]

Theme (2): Lack of readiness and training. This theme describes the challenges that the participants face when needing to preserve placement for children with behavioral issues. The participants responses reflected a lack of readiness and training for both SSP's and foster parents. Moreover, a majority of the participants expressed concern with the lack of training for foster parents as it pertains to working with foster children that have behavioral issues. The participants identified the barriers that comes with a lack of appropriate training on how to work with children with behavioral issues. Furthermore, one participant expressed concern with the training for both foster parents and social service practitioners as it pertains to trauma-informed care. It was noted that there is a lack of knowledge on how to implement crisis intervention with foster children who struggle with behavioral issues and placement disruption. For this theme, participants reported:

What do I do? How do I help this kid? But I felt as a social worker, it was kind of just like, make it up as you go along, because there was no training on how to de-escalate kids. There was no training on how to help kids who are having a mental health crisis or these various behaviors. So how do you help the foster parent when you don't even know yourself? So that was a big struggle. I would say the foster parents definitely don't get enough education and kind of don't get the support from like, especially if they're with the foster family agency. [Participant #1]

Um, there's a whole bunch of challenges. Sometimes the foster parents are not skilled enough to deal with the behavioral issues. They get frustrated trying to just provide support to them and work with the service providers to make sure that the kids that are experiencing those behavioral issues are getting what they need. [Participant #4]

The biggest challenge is determining what are the triggers of the children and making sure that there is a level of support, assessment of support to help the child cope. And then also the environment surrounding the child, whether there are triggering interactions or the caregivers are equipped to guide the child out of the crisis. [Participant #7]

Theme (3): Lack of knowledge on how to address challenges. This theme describes how the participants overcome the challenges the respondents face when preserving placement for children with behavioral issues. The participants responses exhibited a lack of knowledge on how to address the challenges, as there were a variety of different suggestions on how to best address the issue. Participants discussed the difficulties associated with overcoming the challenges of preserving placement for children with behavioral issues. The participants noted issues related to appropriate foster placements that are equipped to meet the children and youths' needs. The participants reported that there are options to attempting to preserve a placement but if those options are exhausted then the participants are aware of the other resources that are available. It was suggested that a proactive approach to preserving placement for children with behavioral issues rather than a reactive approach that leads to multiple placement changes or may result in a lack of placement options:

That's still a work in progress. I don't know the answer to just completely overcome this. Making sure we're matching the children with skilled providers who can meet those needs and who are able to manage without getting too frustrated or upset and it turning into a bigger issue than what it should be. And just making sure that they're receiving those services that they need in order to help them better function or help them to be where

the placement is more stable. I don't think that there's a way that you can just completely overcome it. It's just really making sure that you're matching the kids with a family that is able to meet their needs.

[Participant #4]

So, I mean, if we can preserve the placement, then we'll put safety measures in place or we'll put in extra supports in the home. But in the event that we are not able to overcome those challenges with preserving the placement, then of course we have to look at other resources to find another placement, or the youth would have to go to Child Haven.

[Participant #5]

Try your best to advocate. I mean, unfortunately, a lot of the time we don't, we see a lot of placement breakdowns, a lot of kids just going from one placement to the next. A lot of kids, especially here in Texas, don't have placements right now. And we're seeing a huge loss in foster parents due to the pandemic and a lot of other things. But, you know, just really supporting those caregivers and having conversations early and being really proactive. This is the best strategy you can get. Doesn't always work, though, unfortunately. [Participant #6]

Theme (4): Limited, reactive support. This theme describes the level of organizational support and type of support the participants received when preserving placement for children with behavioral issues. It was observed that the support that the respondents received was limited. The support was reactive rather than proactive. Additionally, most participants agreed that the organizational support is limited and reactive. Participants also reported that the support received lacks appropriate guidance on how to navigate crisis situations:

It would depend on the supervisors. Some were really fantastic and, you know, strategizing with me, even, you know, doing CFTs with me, with the families and the foster families and the kids, other supervisors, not so much management. Again, hit or miss with management and kind of the organization as a whole. I would say that the resources that the organization offers are very limited. Like, it really is kind of, Oh, you're having a kid that's struggling with placement, like just put wrap in or, you know, do a CFT. Like, that was like, those are options, do a CFT or put wrap in or just move them to a group home. [Participant #1]

Um I feel like I mean, a lot of our job is based on our own judgment. So, until things are fully on fire and we've got the notice already, then I get support. But in the time before that, it's on me how I go about putting out these fires before they get to a raging inferno and we've got a 14-day

notice on our hands. So, I would say I get support, but usually it's at the last minute. [Participant #3]

I think the support is pretty low. One is going to be the organizational culture. To having engaged leadership that has the level of experience, patience and grace to be able to foster an environment or contribute to an environment where they can give clear instructions to staff, they can be absolutely available to deal with the crisis. A lot of times the people that are dealing with these crises are dealing with some strong behavior issues. They're left to their own conventions and their own decisions on how to do it, how to deal with it. [Participant #7]

Theme (5): Several factors associated with lack of organizational support. This theme describes what support the participants felt was most effective in helping them preserve placement for children with behavioral issues. The participants responses showed that the organizational support is not in-depth or intensive enough because it is reactive not preventative. The several factors that were identified as effective supports are as follows: Child and Family Team Meeting (CFTM) alongside family involvement and lower caseloads, supervisor support, wraparound services, safety plans, and self-taught strategies. The participants emphasized the need to rely on ones experience to preserve placement:

I would say that CFTM's helped me to extend a placement. I don't think that they helped me to like, preserve it long term, but it would help me get like to the next month or like maybe it would get that placement to hold on just two or three months longer or something like that. But not like when we're talking about really problem solving and like doing long term, like permanent placement. [Participant #1]

I believe the biggest support for me in being able to preserve placements has been my own life experiences and being able to take and extract valuable lessons. [Participant #7]

Theme (6): Various preferred services. This theme describes the support and services the participants wish was available to assist with preserving placement for children with behavioral issues. The responses from the participants varied, as each participant cited a different recommendation on what would be a better support. Participants recommended more training, better service providers, a rapid response team, a specialized unit, trauma informed placements, intersectional trauma informed placements, and a multidisciplinary approach. Theme #6 was expressed as follows:

So, more training for the social workers and then more training for the foster parents and more training on like how to effectively coach foster

parents and help them problem solve and help train them how to deal with these kids. [Participant #1]

I guess it would be a more specialized unit that deals directly with that population, because what our agency has a tendency to do is to clump a whole bunch of duties in one unit or one program area and it's really too much for anybody to manage. [Participant #4]

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this paper was to explore the perception of child welfare social workers competence and confidence when needing to attain placement stability for children in the foster care system who have behavioral issues. The researchers attempted to identify if training and organizational support has an impact on child welfare social workers level of competence and confidence when carrying out the organizations' expectations of preserving placement. The interview questions pertained to how child welfare social workers feel about the training received, learned intervention strategies, and support from the organization in relation to placement preservation.

This exploratory study was conducted under the qualitative research paradigm. Thematic analysis procedures revealed the following six themes: (1) long term commitment to child welfare practice, (2) lack of readiness and training for social service practitioners and resource parents in regards to preserving placement for children with behavioral issues, (3) lack of knowledge on how to address the challenges in regards to preserving placement for children with behavioral issues, (4) limited support that is reactive not proactive when preserving placement for children with behavioral issues, (5) several factors associated with lack of organizational support as it pertains to preserving placement for children with behavioral issues, and (6) various recommended services on how to better preserve placement for children with behavioral issues.

Consistency with Previous Research

The findings in this research are similar to those in previous research studies. In particular, Theme #2 mirrors previous studies that found a relationship between the lack of training for social service practitioners and foster parents and placement disruptions for children with behavioral issues (Koh et al., 2014; Konijn et al., 2019; Shapiro 2020). Koh et al. (2014) found a correlation between foster family related issues and placement disruptions for foster children with behavioral issues. Koh et. al (2104) also cited issues with the recruitment, training, and support of foster parents and their readiness to safely care for children while in care. Similarly, Konijn et al. (2019) found that foster children with behavioral issues externalize their behavior onto the caretaker which increases stress levels and can lead to placement disruptions. In the same vein, the work of Shapiro (2020) demonstrated how additional training and exposure to different practice approaches can increase social workers self-efficacy when implementing EBP.

Elsewhere, the findings in this study, in particular Theme #3, confirm the direct link between the need for a trauma informed lens and the lack of knowledge on the quantifiable steps to take to incorporate this approach in practice. This is consistent with the work of Kerns et al. (2016). Meanwhile, Theme #4 indicates support is limited and reactive for child welfare workers. This theme is reflected in a study done by Vanderwill et al. (2021) and which cited that two main factors attributing to placement instability is the caretakers lack of access to a support system which could be improved by increasing social

workers training on how to better support the foster families and build strong relationships. Finally, Theme #5 found that there were several factors associated with lack of organizational support. Koeske & Koeske's (1989) study revealed a similar finding by identifying a connection between coworker social support and work-related stress. Indeed, Koeske & Koeske's (1989) work highlighted the importance of organizational support.

Implications of the Findings

Implication for Theory

This study carries implication for theory, especially trauma-informed care and social cognitive theory of self-regulation. Theme #2 is consistent with both of these theories. In effect, Theme #2 highlights the importance of trauma-informed care as a mean to address the lack of training that often resulted in placement preservation challenges for children with behavioral issues. Theme #6 also noted various recommendations on increasing placement stability, all of which included additional trauma-informed care and crisis intervention training in some capacity.

Regarding the social cognitive theory of self-regulation, Theme #2 shows how the lack of training impacts social workers readiness to implement evidence-based practice (EBP) when needing to preserve placement for children with behavioral issues. Theme #3 also shows relevance here by describing how participants have a lack of knowledge on how to address the challenges associated with preserving placement. A lack of knowledge contributes to a

decrease in self-confidence as pertains to social workers' perception of their ability to implement EBP.

Implication for Research

This study contributes to the literature by providing additional information on what areas in child welfare practice need to be evaluated to increase placement stability. Themes #4 and #6 are fairly new in the literature because previous research did not focus much on social workers perception of the issue. In fact, these themes directly look at social workers perception of how training and support plays a role in their ability to identify placement preservation strategies. Previous research has looked at the relationship between placement outcomes and behavioral adjustment in children in foster care as well as the impact that placement stability has on their overall behavioral well-being (Konijn et al., 2019). Other research studies did not consider how competent and confident social workers feel in preserving placement for children with behavioral issues. Theme #4 revealed that the support social workers receive from organizations lacks guidance on how to preserve placement for children with behavioral issues. As mentioned above, the support is not only limited but also reactive. As for Theme #6, the focus is on social workers' perception on what is needed to effectively preserve placement. A multidisciplinary approach that includes trauma-informed care is crucial in placement preservation for children with behavioral issues.

Implication for Social Work Practice

The findings in the study have implications for social service organizations. Social workers can use the findings to increase knowledge on ways to overcome the challenges faced when preserving placement. Social workers can also use the research to discuss with supervisors on how to emphasize the need for support. Additionally, child welfare supervisors and managers at the organizational level may be able to use the findings in this study to improve and increase training for social workers and foster parents. The agencies may put an emphasis on increased organizational support to incorporate a proactive approach to preserving placement. For example, Theme #6 recommended more training, better service providers, a rapid response team, a specialized unit, trauma informed placements, intersectional trauma informed placements, and a multidisciplinary approach. On an organizational level, Theme #4 has implication for social work practice by revealing that there is a lack of appropriate support available to social workers in regards to preserving placement.

Implication for Policy

This study includes implications for policy. The policies that are in place, AB 2247 and ACL NO. 19-26, do not provide specific guidance or specific training requirements for social workers to be sufficient in carrying out the expectations for preserving placement for foster children that are laid out in the current policies. Theme #2 calls on the need for an increase in training for social

workers and foster parents. This requires the government to increase funding for the child welfare system so that additional funds can be allocated to the counties to increase social worker and foster parent training.

Limitations and Recommendations

This study is limited in several ways. First, as a qualitative study, there is room for bias despite researchers' best effort to mitigate that outcome. In addition, the views expressed in this study pertain to the participants only, meaning that the findings cannot be generalized. In other words, there should be caution in the interpretation of the findings because the views of 7 people across 3 states (California, Nevada, and Texas) are not that of the entire child welfare workers in the United States. Furthermore, this study lacked diversity by including only 1 male and thus may not accurately represent how male social workers perceive placement preservation for children with behavioral issues.

Future research should focus on ways to address the limitations in this study. For example, researchers can include a larger sample that encompasses the greater United States. This would allow for a better understanding of child welfare social workers' perceptions of preserving placement for children with behavioral issues. Future research may also focus on including a more diverse sample, one that reflects the diversity of the child welfare system.

APPENDIX A: RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Please describe your experience working on behalf of children with behavioral issues (preserving placement for them)?
2. Please describe the challenges you face when preserving placement for children with behavioral issues, if any?
3. How do you overcome those challenges?
4. Describe the level of support that you received from your organization with respect to preserving placement for children with behavioral issues?
5. On a scale of 0-10 (0 being the lowest and 10 the highest) how effective do you feel the organizational support was in helping you preserve placement for children with behavioral issues?
6. Why did you give this number on the scale?
7. What type of organizational support did you receive regarding preserving placement for children with behavioral issues?
8. Which support do you feel was most effective in helping you preserve placement for children with behavioral issues? Why?
9. What support or service do you wish you had to assist you in preserving placement for children with behavioral issues? Why?

(Developed by Tara Beam and Jessica Quin)

APPENDIX B: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL



October 7, 2022

CSUSB INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

Administrative/Exempt Review Determination

Status: Determined Exempt

IRB-FY2022-222

Rigaud Joseph Jessica Quin, Tara Beam
CSBS - Social Work
California State University, San Bernardino
5500 University Parkway
San Bernardino, California 92407

Dear Rigaud Joseph Jessica Quin, Tara Beam:

Your application to use human subjects, titled "Preserving Placement for Children with Behavioral Issues: A Qualitative Study of Child Welfare Social Workers in the United States" 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 weighed the risks and benefits of the study to ensure the protection of human participants.

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. Investigators should consider the changing COVID-19 circumstances based on current CDC, California Department of Public Health, and campus guidance and submit appropriate protocol modifications to the IRB as needed. CSUSB campus and affiliate health screenings should be completed for all campus human research related activities. Human research activities conducted at off-campus sites should follow CDC, California Department of Public Health, and local guidance. See CSUSB's [COVID-19 Prevention Plan](#) for more information regarding campus requirements.

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 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-FY2022-222 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,

King-To Yeung

King-To Yeung, Ph.D., IRB Chair
CSUSB Institutional Review Board

KY/MG

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ASSIGNED RESPONSIBILITIES

All chapters were completed together by Tara Beam and Jessica Quin.

Both researchers worked together in creating the interview questions, conducting the interviews, and analyzing the data.