2003

**Electronic access to academic records by Department of Children's Services social workers**

Pamela Jean Wagner

Christal June Quam

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ELECTRONIC ACCESS TO ACADEMIC RECORDS BY
DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES 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
Pamela Jean Wagner
Christal June Quam
June 2003
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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study posed the question: Would San Bernardino County Department of Children’s Services (DCS) social workers obtain clients’ school transcripts if they had electronic access to those records? Though the study was primarily quantitative, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected. The study utilized an original survey questionnaire that was distributed to all San Bernardino County line workers during a two-week period in July 2002. The researchers designed the survey with primarily closed ended questions to make it simple and easy for the social workers to complete. Quantitative data were evaluated using t-tests. The qualitative responses, drawn from the survey’s one open ended question, asked social workers about barriers to using such an electronic system. Their answers raised new questions for future research and the feasibility of coordinating a database between the County Superintendent of Schools and DCS.
We wish to thank the San Bernardino County Department of Children’s Services for their support in making this research possible. We are thankful to all the participants for taking the time to respond to our survey. Special thanks go to Chani Beaman for sharing her time and knowledge to assist us with the SPSS when entering our data. We are grateful for Dr. Rosemary McCaslin’s willingness, patience, and support to guide us through this project. Last but not least, we wish to thank our families for their patience and support during this project.
DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to all the foster children in special education.
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Problem Statement

Research indicates that foster children often need special education (Coulling, 2000; Donlevy, 2000; Donlevy, 2001). However, from the professional experience of the individuals conducting this research project, San Bernardino County Department of Children’s Services (DCS) social workers, carrying heavy caseloads, generally do not have time to investigate a child’s school history prior to placement in a foster care home. As a result, foster children often are placed in mainstream classrooms by the schools, for reasons of expediency, even if the child has been in special education prior to placement.

There is no straightforward way for a social worker or foster parent to access school records in San Bernardino County. Due to the geographical size of the county, foster placements can be hundreds of miles away from the child’s biological home or previous foster home. In these situations, if a foster family or social worker wants to obtain the child’s previous school records, they might have to drive large distance to retrieve the transcripts. In addition, access to records by foster
families is limited because schools require proof that the foster family is the legal guardian of the child; if a child has been placed with the family prior to court proceedings that make them the legal guardian, the foster family may not have that proof.

According to Tom Loomis (personal communication, April 23, 2002), the Coordinator of Curriculum and Student Services at Hesperia Unified School District, schools do request transcripts after they are notified of the name and location of the previous school. However, Mr. Loomis stated that the process of transferring transcripts could take several weeks to a few months. Moreover, children often move from foster home to foster home. If school records were not transferred at the time the child moved, valuable information could be lost that would help the child be successful in school.

By the time a foster child reaches the age of 16 and is eligible for an Independent Living Program (a program intended to help adolescents transition from foster care to independent living), the student may lack the school units required for graduation, may not have obtained skills necessary for self-sufficiency, and may have developed low self-esteem due to chronic school failure. Additionally, often neither the foster family nor the
social worker has advocated for the child, had the child tested, or researched the child’s previous records to determine appropriate classroom placement. Children frequently age out of foster care (turn 18 years old) without the requisite skills for obtaining employment or securing housing. Therefore, the authors of this study conclude that the lack of a simple, easy records accessing tool is detrimental to foster children in San Bernardino County.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine whether or not DCS social workers would obtain clients’ educational records if they had electronic access to these records. The relationship between foster children and the need for special education has been established (Coulling, 2000; Donlevy, 2000; Donlevy, 2001). Therefore, the authors contend, a computerized system allowing social workers to obtain school records for children going into foster homes is crucial. If a social worker could access client school records quickly and easily and then enter the information into the case management computer system, the school history would travel with the client to their new environment. This information would ensure that the foster
child with special education needs was placed in the proper classroom, giving the child a better chance to succeed.

DCS personnel, foster parents, foster children, and school personnel would benefit from an electronic system of academic records. Since foster children are DCS clients, it is the responsibility of the DCS social worker to advocate for the welfare of the child, including the child’s educational welfare (California Department of Education, Special Education Division, 2002). DCS personnel using the proposed electronic record system could inform foster parents and schools of the child’s school history before the transcripts arrived at the school (which could take several months) thus providing educational continuity and contributing to the well-being of the child. According to Marcus (1991), placing a child in the proper learning environment as soon as possible eases adjustment into foster care and increases school success. The child will have an easier time accommodating to a new home and school, will be less frustrated and less apt to act out, and will make educational progress (Marcus, 1991).

Having this information early would decrease the stress and frustration of school staff as well as that of
the foster parents. They would know immediately where to place the student. School personnel would be able to help the student more efficiently and with more understanding.

The goal of this study was to ascertain whether or not social workers in San Bernardino County are amenable to using an electronic school record system. Since San Bernardino County DCS social workers have large caseloads and limited time, a short quantitative survey instrument was designed that addresses the research question adequately while requiring minimal time to complete. The survey consisted primarily of closed ended questions, with one open-ended question to provide more in depth understanding of the data.

The data source of this study was a sample of convenience that included 126 San Bernardino County DCS social workers. The survey was distributed by personal delivery and by San Bernardino County inter-office mail, and collected via inter-office mail.

Significance of the Project for Social Work

This study was a first step toward exploring the possibility of creating and implementing an electronic database of student school records. Based on the researchers' understanding of the literature reviewed and
their professional experience, some type of DCS interface with schools is needed, but no specific suggestions, such as a computerized database, are discussed in the literature or utilized in current social work practice.

Policy makers armed with the knowledge that social workers in San Bernardino County desire such a system would have an easier time passing necessary legislation and obtaining required funds. Perhaps a test system could be constructed, making the San Bernardino County Superintendent of Schools records available to the Department of Children’s Services. The purpose of the electronic system suggested in this study is to provide information that may, in the long run, allow more foster children to graduate from high school, become employable, gain skills necessary for self-sufficiency, and perhaps attend college. If the system worked in San Bernardino County, it is possible that other counties in the state of California would adopt the system. Ultimately, a nation-wide system of electronic school records is envisioned.

This study is pertinent to social work practice in general, since social workers are being asked to utilize computers more and more frequently as tools to gather and provide data. The results of the study give some
indication of the attitudes of social workers in San Bernardino County toward one facet of computer use. Moreover, the current study is relevant specifically to child welfare practice. From the researchers' experience, foster children need as much assistance as they can get from social workers. School records are just one item on a long list of the needs of a child placed in the foster system.

School history is vital information that can significantly influence the future success of a child. The authors believe that foster parents should have immediate access to this information and that social workers are the appropriate link between the school system and the foster parent. For that reason, this study posed the following question: Would San Bernardino County Department of Children's Services social workers obtain clients' school records if they had electronic access to those records?
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Chapter Two consists of a discussion of the relevant literature. First, a brief history of special education legislation in the United States is presented as a foundation for this study. The historical foundation is followed by a review of identified barriers for foster children in accessing special education and possible solutions to those barriers. Finally, person-in-environment theory, the theoretical perspective guiding the study, is discussed.

Brief History of Special Education Legislation

United States citizens commonly view public education as a birthright in this country, but accessible education has not always been available (Ysseldyke & Algozzine, 1984). Rhode Island was the first state to recognize the need for accessible education by passing a compulsory education law in 1840, and by 1918 all states had followed suit and passed compulsory laws (Ysseldyke & Algozzine, 1984). Unfortunately, children with disabilities often were excluded from public schools in spite of laws
requiring education for all children (Ysseldyke & Agozzine, 1984). In 1893, the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court ruled that public schools could expel a child who was weak in mind, unable to benefit from instruction, or who was deemed troublesome to other children (Ysseldyke & Algozzine, 1984). By 1910 most public schools had classrooms for children with disabilities; still, numerous children in general education remained unidentified as having learning disabilities, were considered beyond the reach of special education, had dropped out of school, or were labeled as unable to learn (Winnzer, 1993).

Sixty-five years passed before "the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 brought a major shift in the responsibility for educating people with disabilities" (Selice, 2000, p. 89) to the public school system. Seventeen years later, in 1992, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), was passed to protect people with mental or physical disabilities from discrimination based on their disability (Oesterreich, 1995). Under this law, children with disabilities had to be served by public schools.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) expanded on the ADA by stipulating that all public
education agencies must ensure that the placement of every child with a handicapping condition be evaluated at least annually, be based on the child's Individualized Education Program (IEP), and be as close as possible to the child's home (George, Van Voohis, Grant, Casey, & Robinson, 1992). IDEA was developed as a result of research like the 1992 study that found that more than six times as many foster children receive special education services as children not in foster care, and that they are older on average than the general special education population (George, et al, 1992).

Not only were schools called to accountability, legislation affecting social workers was passed to protect these children (California Department of Education, Special Education Division, 2002b). "Assembly Bill 2375 is a measure revising and clarifying the Welfare and Institutions Code provision to include the responsibility of county welfare departments of child protective services (CPS) personnel and juvenile court personnel to ensure that they provide educational services to children adjudged a dependent of the court, including special education services for children" (California Department of Education, Special Education Division, 2002b, p. 2). The bill states it is the right of a child to receive special
educational services if the child has exceptional needs or disabilities as defined in Section 504 of the Federal Rehabilitation Act. Child welfare social workers are mandated to pursue appropriate educational services for disabled children under their care (California Department of Education, Special Education Division, 2002).

Barriers to Academic Achievement

Research indicates that child abuse and neglect are the number one barriers to academic achievement (Kurtz, 1988). The California Department of Education, Special Education Division (2002) has provided the following statistics:

- Fifty percent of juvenile delinquents have undetected learning disabilities
- Sixty percent of children in substance abuse treatment have learning disabilities
- Thirty five percent of learning disabled youth drop out of high school
- Sixty two percent of those who do not complete high school are unemployed one year later
- Twenty to 55 percent of adult offenders are learning disabled
- Locking children up for delinquency costs $31,000 per year
- Incarcerating adults costs $21,000 per year.

Moreover, the lack of a high school education means a person will qualify primarily for low wage jobs, leading to a life of poverty (Krager & Stoesz, 1998). Yet, special education services required by law cost less than $10,000 per year per student (California Department of Education, Special Education Division, 2002). The above statistics show the importance of special education as an intervention for the at risk population served by child welfare social workers.

The authors concluded, from the literature reviewed for this project and from professional experience in the field, that children are faced with a multitude of changes as they enter foster care, including the adjustment to a new school situation. As Marcus (1991), states, “Foster parents must attempt to stabilize the child’s life despite past emotionally damaging experiences and the enormous number of adjustments the child must make to a new environment, which includes different adult caretakers, homes, neighborhoods, schools, and peer relationships” (p. 367). Another study showed that special education services are second only to mental health services in
services requested by foster parents (Zima, Bussing, Yang, & Belin, 2000). In fact, "children in foster care are placed in special education about three times more often than children in the general population" (Smuckett & Kauffman, 1996, p. 30). Another researcher found that children in foster care are placed in special education six times more often than other children (George et al., 1992). If not placed appropriately, Donlevy (2001) states that children "are likely to lose academic standing...and may fall further, perhaps permanently, behind their companions in regular education" (p. 215). If social workers had electronic access to school records, continuity of care would be provided and many of the academic problems for foster children could be alleviated.

To complicate the problem of school adjustment for children with special needs in the foster care system, the literature shows that "the number of families involved with CPS far exceeds the capacity of the system" (Waldfogel, 2000, p. 43). A 1990 Department of Health and Human Services study reported that child abuse and neglect reports increased from 60,000 to 2.4 million between 1974 and 1989 (Clark & Prange, 1994). Clark and Prange go on to state, "between 1984 and 1989-90, the number of foster homes decreased 2.7% whereas the percentage of children
needing foster placements increased 48%" (p. 2). As a result of this trend, social workers are pushed harder and harder to meet the demands of their job (Soderfeldt & Soderfeldt, 1995; Um & Harrison, 1998). The overwhelming workload leads to employee burnout and a high employee turnover rate, which may disrupt “continuity and quality of care to those needing services” (Mor Barak, Nissly, & Levin, 2001, p. 627). According to Louise Cooper, special education teacher in Salinas, California, many court dependent children are not identified as learning disabled (personal communication, May 2, 2002). Instead, as the researchers know from experience, often these children are labeled by social workers and school personnel as troublemakers or lazy.

The researchers of this project aver that foster children with learning disabilities will not be placed in appropriate classes if social workers do not have the time to do their job thoroughly. Furthermore, in the course of a workday, social workers in San Bernardino County cannot physically retrieve records from schools or make the multiple phone calls often required to ensure desired outcomes. They have to wait for the schools to transfer records in the usual way because they do not have time or means for any other type of intervention.
Proposed Solutions

The Social Work Code of Ethics (Selice, 2000) asserts that social workers have a responsibility to promote the well being of clients. Moreover, the law requires them to do so (California Department of Education, Special Education Division, 2002b). Foster children with special learning needs deserve and require timely, appropriate classroom placement to be successful in school. The authors believe that most students will not be placed appropriately as long as social workers with heavy caseloads lack a simple, fast way to obtain records.

A customized approach to foster care children is necessary to ensure their maximum success, including school placement (Waldfogel, 2000). A report presented to the Department of Human Services in Washington, D.C., by Barth, Gibbs, and Siebenaler (2001), states foster and adoptive families "have stressed the importance of full disclosure about their child" (p. 10). It seems that foster parents want as much information as possible about their child. Furthermore, student success is greatest in schools where families, teachers, social workers, and other caregivers work together for the benefit of the child (Coulling, 2000; Runyan & Gould, 1985). Electronic access to school records, as presented in the current
study, would promote for foster children what the above literature suggests is most beneficial: schools, families, and DCS social workers working in concert for the good of the child.

Theory Guiding Conceptualization

Person-in-environment theory guides this study aptly. Karls and Wandrei (1992) define person-in-environment theory as an ideological framework specific to the field of social work, "in which human behavior is seen as the result of intrapersonal and interpersonal forces in dynamic interaction" (p. 81). Additionally, a person's environment is viewed "as a product of forces within and between social institutions" (Karls & Wandrei, 1992, p. 81). In other words, a person with unique personality traits, strengths, and limitations interacts with the environment (home, school, or other social institutions) in an individualized way, depending on a multitude of personal and social variables specific to that person and situation (Karls & Wandrei, 1992).

The notion of adaptation verses adjustment as part of person-in-environment theory (Germain & Bloom, 1999) is helpful when considering foster children. The term adjustment is used throughout the literature; yet,
according to Germain and Bloom (1990) that word implies passivity. A child needs to adapt actively to a new school situation or have help adapting. Part of the job of a social worker is to strive to help a client to adapt or "search for a better fit" to their environment (Germain & Bloom, 1999, p. 11). Raffaele and Knoff (1999), agree that learned adaptation through "systematic planning by school personnel" (p. 1) in collaboration with parents (or foster parents) is essential for children with "social and economic disadvantages" (p. 1), such as foster children. They state that this collaboration is essential for all children, but it is particularly important for the impoverished, those with unstable homes and parents with limited education, and those who experience "cultural discontinuity" (p. 1).

In a study conducted by Dunst, Bruder, Trifeffe, Hamby, Raab, and McLean (2001), it was found that "the characteristics of everyday learning opportunities matter a great deal in terms of the behavioral consequences" (p. 19) or readiness to learn. Raffaele and Knoff (1999), concur. They state that a positive school experience will result when "curricular and other resources are well-chosen and adaptive to individual student needs" (p. 6). Consequently, accurate and accessible school
records would facilitate proper classroom placement and help a foster child adapt to a new school environment.

Summary

The literature, the authors' professional experience, and the personal interviews cited in Chapter Two supports the need for electronic access to school records. First, the literature establishes a connection between foster children and an increased incidence of learning disabilities. Moreover, both the literature and the professional experience of the authors reveal that social workers face increasingly large workloads and cannot assist with record retrieval during their normal workday. The personal interviews and the literature demonstrate that the inability to obtain records delays the proper classroom placement of foster children. Person-in-environment theory, also presented in Chapter Two, shows that proper classroom placement can facilitate adaptation and may lead to greater life success for foster children with special education needs.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

This exploratory, quantitative study focused on the readiness of San Bernardino County Department of Child Services social workers to use electronic access to obtain client school records, if they were available. The researchers created an original survey tool to collect data from the social workers. Researchers focused on the following demographics: the region where the social worker is employed, the gender of the social worker, and the worker's job title. Data was examined primarily by means of descriptive analysis. The researchers analyzed the data further using the Spearman's rho nonparametric statistical test.

Study Design

As mentioned above, this research project was an exploratory and primarily quantitative study using the survey as a research tool. A short, easy to complete survey instrument was developed specifically for this study. San Bernardino County DCS social workers have high caseloads and usually do not have adequate time to complete their required duties in the course of the day.
Hence, a more lengthy survey with many open-ended questions could have discouraged DCS social workers from responding because of their time limitations. The survey instrument contained thirteen closed-ended questions and one open-ended question for a more complete understanding of the data, and utilized a combination of nominal, ordinal, and interval/ratio scales. A copy of the survey instrument is attached in Appendix A.

Three hundred and seventy-five survey packets were delivered to the Administrative Clerk in each DCS region with verbal instructions requesting that the packets be distributed to intake and case management social workers (both intake workers and case managers are known also as line workers). Yucca Valley DCS received the survey packets via San Bernardino County inter-office mail. Provision was made for the surveys to be returned to the researchers through the San Bernardino County inter-office mail system with a self-addressed return envelope. The main limitation to this method of disbursing the surveys was the possible low rate of return of questionnaires, leading to an inadequate sample size for data analysis. However, 126 social workers responded. The researchers invited DCS social workers to enter a $50.00 prize drawing, regardless of whether or not they returned the
survey. The procedure for this drawing and for returning the surveys is detailed later on in this chapter.

Sampling

The study used a voluntary convenience sample of 126 San Bernardino County DCS intake and case management social workers. A letter of support from San Bernardino County DCS for this research can be found in Appendix D. The Department of Social Work Sub-Committee of the CSUSB Institutional Review Board and the San Bernardino County of Children’s Services approved the project prior to data collection. The sample included male and female line workers of any ethnicity, age, or background, but excluded supervisors, managers, and clerical staff. Researchers were interested in line worker perspectives only, since having records electronically accessible would impact their job duties more directly than it would the other types of employees mentioned above.

Data Collection and Instruments

The survey instrument utilized in this project asked for demographic information regarding the geographic region where the employee works, job title, length of employment with DCS, gender, year of birth, and educational level. It also asked if the worker had foster
children in his/her caseload that are enrolled in special education classes, if those clients have ever received tutoring, how often the worker obtains transcripts for those foster children, the method used to obtain that information, how long it takes for them to request the information, and the usual length of time get the results back once the request is made. All of the items listed above are independent variables. The last question on the survey addressed the dependent variable. It asked the question, “If electronic/computer access to school records were available, would you be more likely to obtain the foster child’s records?” In addition, the survey asked the social workers to identify any perceived barriers to utilizing an electronic access system for obtaining school transcripts. These barriers are addressed in the Discussion section of the project.

The researchers analyzed the data using univariate statistics describing the following independent variables in the statistical analysis: the region where the worker is employed, the gender of the worker, and the worker’s exact job title. All three of these independent variables are nominal levels of measurement. The dependent variable, DCS social workers’ willingness to access clients’
academic records from an electronic database, is also a nominal level of measurement.

The operational definition of clients' school records/transcripts, for purposes of this study, is a client's grades and type of classes (i.e. special education and/or mainstream classes). The term electronic academic database refers to a computer program that would allow social workers access to students' transcripts. The terms DCS social workers and intake workers were operationally defined earlier in this section.

The survey instrument was developed from the researchers' field experience, knowledge of DCS policy and procedure, and understanding of the job of a DCS social worker. The survey was pre-tested by individuals unrelated to this study. They reported the survey to be clear and easy to comprehend. Validity and reliability of the survey instrument cannot be reported since this is a unique survey tool that has not been previously administered.

Procedures

Upon Institutional Review Board approval, the researchers prepared a packet that included the informed consent, the survey instrument, a debriefing statement, a two part numbered raffle ticket, and a self-addressed
return envelope. The return envelopes were not stamped with postage since the respondents sent the packets back by inter-office mail. The packets were delivered in bundles to the DCS Administrative clerks in each office by one of the researchers. Only the bundle directed to the Yucca Valley office was delivered by inter-office mail due to the driving time required to deliver the packets in person. Clerks were asked to distribute the survey packets to the DCS social workers by placing one in each worker’s mailbox. Respondents were requested to return the completed survey and half of the numbered raffle ticket to the researchers within two weeks of receipt via county inter-office mail in the envelope provided. The DCS mail carrier then delivered the completed packets to the researchers. The survey packets were delivered to the DCS offices on July 22, 2002. The packets addressed to the Yucca Valley office were placed in inter-office mail on the same day. Researchers requested that the surveys be returned to them by August 7, 2002.

Protection of Human Subjects

To ensure anonymity of the participants, surveys were distributed to all DCS intake workers and case managers. Confidentiality was not an issue in this study since names
or other identifying information were not requested on the consent form, survey, raffle ticket or the enclosed envelope. The informed consent was attached to the front of each survey instrument. Participants were able to complete the survey privately, at their own desk or other location of their choice. The completed survey instruments and the informed consents were destroyed after the data was tabulated.

A debriefing statement was attached to the back of each survey instrument and the respondent was able to tear off the statement and keep it after completing the survey. The respondent placed the consent form, completed survey, and one half of the numbered raffle ticket in the enclosed self-addressed envelope and placed the sealed envelope in the county inter-office mail bin in their office. The DCS mail carrier delivered all returned packets to the researchers. The Administrative Clerk in each office was notified of the winning number from the raffle by e-mail, and was asked to post it in each office so that the social worker with that number could claim the prize. Copies of the informed consent and the debriefing statement are found in Appendix B and C.
Data Analysis

The number of survey packets distributed and the number returned provided the data for this study. The quantitative data was organized using the Statistical Package of Social Science (SPSS). Frequency tables, percentage tables, and graphs were used to represent the data. Researchers examined the qualitative data provided in the last question of the survey by using descriptive analysis tools of frequency charts and graphs.

After examining the data, researchers tested whether or not a relationship existed between any or all of the independent variables mentioned above and the dependent variable. Researchers used a nonparametric statistical test, the t-test. Researchers evaluated data based on educational level, the number of clients on the caseload in special education that receive tutoring, how often the worker attempts to obtain transcripts, the method by which they attempt to obtain the records, the time it takes them to make the request, and how long it is before the requested information is received. This additional information was refined and tested. These other findings are also addressed in the Discussion section of the project.
Summary

In this study, researchers explored a need in current social work practice for a quick, easy method of accessing foster child school records by looking at the willingness of social workers at San Bernardino County DCS to access academic records electronically. Use of proper methodology ensured anonymity of participants. A prize raffle opportunity was included with the questionnaire. The simple survey tool, created specifically for DCS line social workers, included thirteen closed-ended questions and one open-ended question. Researchers compared independent variables with the dependent variable. Data was refined using descriptive analysis and further analyzed using a t-test. Researchers also reported other findings, such as the respondents' perceived barriers to using an electronic system.
CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

The 126 participants of this study are representative of the San Bernardino County DCS social worker population. The population consisted of DCS social workers in all three regions of San Bernardino County: Rancho, San Bernardino, and Desert. The data were analyzed using quantitative methods and are presented in the following tables and graphs.

Demographic Information

The regional distribution of participants is shown in the table below. The majority of the participants (42%) were from the San Bernardino region. Desert social workers constituted 29.4% of the sample and Rancho, 28.6% (see Table 1).

Table 1. Number of Response by Regional Office (n = 126)

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<td>Rancho</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>28.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Bernardino</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>42.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None stated</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sample Descriptions

There were 23 male participants (18.3%), 100 Female (79.4%), and three whose gender was not stated (2.4%). They ranged in age from 24 to 70, with a mean age of 43 years and a standard deviation of 11.54. Eleven participants did not report their age. The length of employment ranged from 1 month to 35 years, with a mean of 5.5 years, and a standard deviation of 6.5. Within the sample, 43.2% had their Bachelors degree, 53.6% had their Masters degree, three participants had their doctorate degree, and only one did not report their educational level.

Among the participants, 65.3% reported that they had clients in special education classes (Figure 1) and 77.7% reported clients' who had received tutoring (Table 2). Clients in special education and clients receiving tutoring services were dichotomous variables; each was analyzed using univariate statistic.
Figure 1. Number of Social Workers with Clients in Special Education Classes

Table 2. Number of Social Workers with Clients Receiving Tutoring Services

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Receiving Tutoring</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>77.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>22.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No response</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Educational Transcripts

Participant reported the following, regarding how often they obtained transcripts from schools (see Table 3). The largest number (23.1%) reported they never obtained transcripts, 12.4% obtained transcripts quarterly, 19.8% obtained transcripts each semester, and 9.9% obtained transcripts annually. The participants who responses gave other gave the following explanations: they obtained transcripts as needed, occasionally, at a point of investigation, when child was moved, or when at an Individual Education Plan (IEP) was completed.

Table 3. How Often Transcripts were Obtained

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Obtained Transcripts</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>23.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quarterly</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semester</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>19.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yearly</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>34.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Response</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Social workers obtained transcripts by the following methods: 21% by visiting schools, 21% by faxing or mailing a letter to school, 31.1% through foster parents, and one
respondent reported obtaining transcripts at the clients Individual Education Plan (IEP) meeting (see Table 4).

Table 4. Method Social Worker Used to Obtain Transcripts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method of Obtaining Transcripts</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Visit school</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>21.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fax or Mail letter</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>21.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From Foster Parent</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>31.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not applicable</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>13.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>13.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Response</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Time Involved to Request and Receive Transcripts

The participants reported the time it took to request transcripts ranged from 5 minutes to 2 hours, with a mean of .5280 minutes and a standard deviation of .5411. The participants also reported the time it took to obtain transcripts ranged from 5 minutes to 6 weeks, with a mean of 156.64 minutes and a standard deviation of 205.64.

Computer Access Response

If computer access to school records was available, 91.1% of the social workers that participated in this
study reported they would be more likely to obtain the foster child's records. A few participants noted that computer access would be a good idea because it would save time and bypass non-compliant office staff at schools. The variables "job title" and "use of computer to access school records" were statistically analyzed and charted (see Figure 2). For the purpose of the analysis the combined response of the Social Worker IIIs and Social Service Practitioners regarding computer access is shown in the graph below, as respondents in both job titles favored implementing computer access of clients' school records.

Figure 2. Bar Graph of Combined Job Titles and Use of Computer Access to School Records
A parametric statistical t-test was used to assess how long it took to receive transcripts and whether the DCS workers favored the use of computer access to school records. Results showed that there was no statistical significance between how long it took to receive transcripts and whether the DCS workers favored the use of computer access to school records. The test showed a mean of .5390 (minutes) for workers in favor of computer access to school records and a mean of .4150 (minutes) for those opposed. The test gave a t-value of .444, .82 degrees of freedom, and a p value < .05.

Barriers Reported by Participants

Participants reported the following as possible barriers that would keep them from utilizing computer access: did not need information on education, preferred personal contact, saw confidentially as a problem, and perceived learning a another computer program as a problem.
CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Introduction

This project answered the original research question: Would San Bernardino County DCS social workers use electronic access to obtain transcripts for foster children? The majority of respondents stated that they would use electronic access to obtain transcripts if they had the opportunity. The tests performed on the data did not demonstrate statistical significance between the dependent and independent variables. However, the information extracted from the project provides a foundation for further study into this subject.

Discussion

The study found that the majority of children placed in foster homes in San Bernardino County are in special education classes and/or receive tutoring. Despite the findings, most of the social workers that responded to the survey do not try to obtain transcripts for the children on their caseloads. Those that do try to get school records rely primarily on the foster parents to provide the transcripts rather than contacting the schools themselves. Nevertheless, the overwhelming majority of
social workers participating in this study stated that they would use computer access to obtain transcripts if it was available.

This was an exploratory study. Therefore, no prior data were available on this subject, with two exceptions. The literature reviewed and this study both showed that children in foster care are more likely to be in special education classes. Also, one school employee interviewed during the design phase of the study stated that it often takes months to obtain transcripts from the student's previous school. This study supported that statement. Social workers responding to the survey indicated that it could take as long as two hours to request transcripts and up to six weeks to receive them.

This research had one unexpected result. Several social workers stated on the survey that they do not consider obtaining transcripts to be part of their job. Researchers had expected social workers to identify their lack of time, large caseloads, or uncooperative school employees as barriers. However, the survey results suggest that perceived job duties could be another reason that social workers do not request transcripts.
No statistical significance was noted between any of the variables tested. Despite the lack of significant statistical findings, the research question was answered.

Social workers in San Bernardino County would use a computerized system of obtaining transcripts if it was available. Additionally, the study provided a basis for more in-depth research. It raised questions about how social workers view their job duties and about barriers between DCS and the school system that would have to be overcome for a computerized system to succeed.

Limitations

The survey tool used in this study was limited in several ways. Two questions on the survey were worded ambiguously (see Appendix A). Respondents were unsure whether to answer those questions with numbers of days, weeks, or minutes, or merely check a box. Also, it would have been helpful to break down the job description categories between carrier workers and intake workers to get a better idea of which workers would use computer access to transcripts. Moreover, the survey could have included questions about caseload sizes and perceived job duties. Additionally, the number of respondents might have been influenced by the offer of a prize drawing. Although
the Informed Consent attached to the survey stated that all social workers could enter the drawing whether or not they completed the survey, it is possible that social workers felt obligated to fill out the surveys anyway.

Further research will need to address which social workers at DCS would use such a system: carriers, intake workers, or both. Since implementing the system would impact the jobs of school office personnel, they would need to be surveyed also. An analysis would need to be done to see if an electronic system would assist both social workers and clients enough to warrant the cost. Future research will also need to examine the feasibility of installing such an electronic system in San Bernardino County, taking into consideration the size of the county and existing computer system capabilities. Finally, research must be done to examine the perceptions of DCS social workers regarding their responsibilities to foster children in the realm of education. Results could be used to design training classes that would facilitate social workers' understanding of this part of the job.

Conclusions

This study concludes that San Bernardino County DCS social workers would use a system of electronic access to
obtain the transcripts of foster children even though not all social workers see this as part of their job. Since most foster children in San Bernardino County are in special education classes and/or receive tutoring, school transcripts are vital to ensure goodness of fit between the foster child and the classroom. This study also concludes that DCS social workers need a quick method of obtaining this information.

Recommendations for Social Work Practice, Policy, and Research

On February 14, 2003, an Assembly Bill was presented to the California State Legislature that calls for many of the changes this research project recommends. The proposed legislation, AB 490, urges child welfare agencies, schools, and other agencies serving children to work together to accommodate the special educational needs of foster children. The bill recommends that transcripts be transferred from schools to child welfare agencies within two working days of receiving the request. This procedure would increase the probability of appropriate and timely classroom placement of foster children. The law would permit full access of school records to social workers for the purpose of facilitating school transfers and classroom placements (Steinberg, 2003).
Assembly Bill 490 underscores the ethical predicament and practice issues facing child welfare social workers in San Bernardino County in the arena of special education services for foster children. Social workers have difficulty advocating for foster children’s educational rights due to distance and time. In many instances they are not able to get any prior school information at all for the children on their caseload. Not only would AB 490 allow child welfare social workers to do their jobs more effectively and ethically, it would guarantee that foster children have "...a meaningful opportunity to meet the academic achievement standards to which all pupils are held...and have access to the [same] academic resources...as all other pupils" (Steinberg, 2003, p.1). Therefore, research that supports legislation such as AB 490 must continue. Moreover, social workers and educators will need to advocate loudly and consistently for the passage of this and similar legislation.
APPENDIX A

QUESTIONNAIRE
Survey

For the following questions, please circle one answer or fill in the blank as appropriate:

* In what region is your office located? Desert    Rancho    San Bernardino

* Job title: __________________________________________

* Length of employment with DCS: Years _____    Months _____

* Gender: Male    Female    * Year you were born: ___________

* Highest level of education completed:

  1. High school
  2. AA/AS
  3. BA/BS
  4. MSW or MA
  5. PhD
  6. Other (please specify) __________________________

* Do you have foster children on your caseload who are in any type of special education classes, i.e. SDC, RSP, etc? a) Yes    b) No

* Currently or in the past, have any of the foster children on your caseload received tutoring? a) Yes    b) No

* How often do you obtain your foster child’s transcripts?

  1. Never
  2. Quarterly
  3. Semester
  4. Yearly
  5. Other (please specify) __________________________

* What would best describe the way you currently obtain a foster child’s/client’s transcripts?

  1. Visit school
  2. Fax a letter to school
  3. Mail letter to school
  4. Through foster parent
  5. Not applicable
  6. Other (please specify) __________________________
* On average, how much time is spent requesting a client's transcript?  
Minutes _____ Hours _____

* When you request the transcript, approximately how long does it take to actually receive the transcript?  
Minutes_____ Hours_____ Days_____ Weeks_____

* If computer access to school records were available, would you be more likely to obtain the foster child’s records?  
a) Yes  b) No

*If no, what do you perceive as the barrier for you? ________________________________

(Please Return With Consent Form & Raffle Ticket)
APPENDIX B

INFORMED CONSENT
Informed Consent

The study in which you are about to participate is designed to explore access to clients’ transcripts or school records by DCS intake workers and case managers. Christal Quam and Pam Wagner are conducting this study as part of their Master of Social Work program at California State University, San Bernardino, under the supervision of Dr. Rosemary McCaslin, Professor of Social Work. The Department of Social Work Sub-committee of the CSUSB Institutional Review Board and the Department of Children’s Services has approved this study. There are no foreseeable risks to participating in this study. It is hoped that clients, social workers, and foster parents will benefit from this project.

The survey asks demographic questions as well as questions pertaining to your employment, such as where you work, length of employment, and your clients’ school records. The entire package should take less than 10 minutes to complete. Please do not consult with other participants as you complete the survey.

You will have an opportunity to participate in a raffle drawing for $50.00 whether or not you choose to complete the survey. Enclose one half of the numbered raffle ticket in the return envelope (with or without the survey enclosed). Retain your half of the raffle ticket until the winning number is posted in your office on or about September 4, 2002.

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to participate in this study, your employment with DCS will not be affected in any way. Your identity will remain anonymous; do not put your name on any documents.

If you have any concerns about this study or about your participation, please contact Dr. Rosemary McCaslin at (909) 880-5507.

Consent to Participate

I acknowledge that I have been informed of and understand the nature of this study. I am at least 18 years old and I freely consent to participate in this study as the mark below indicates.

Participant’s Mark ___________ Today’s Date ____________________

(Please Return With Survey & Raffle Ticket)
APPENDIX C

DEBRIEFING STATEMENT
Debriefing Statement

Thank you for participating in this study.

The study in which you participated will explore DCS Intake Workers and Case Managers accessibility to client's school records. Your responses will be held in strict confidence.

If you are interested in the results of this study they will be available June 2003 in the Pfau Library at Cal-State University San Bernardino. If you have any questions or concern regarding the research, you may contact Dr. Rosemary McCaslin at (909) 880-5507.

The drawing for participating in the study will be for $100 and will be held on September 1, 2002. All questionnaires need to be returned by July 10, 2002. Please keep one copy of the ticket. The winning ticket will be posted on the front door to each office on September 4, 2002.
REFERENCES


This was a two-person project where authors collaborated throughout. These responsibilities were assigned in the manner listed below.

1. Data Collection:
   Team Effort Pamela Wagner & Christal Quam
2. Data Entry and Analysis:
   Team Effort Pamela Wagner & Christal Quam
3. Writing Report and Presentation of Findings:
   a. Introduction and Literature:
      Team Effort Pamela Wagner & Christal Quam
   b. Methods:
      Team Effort Pamela Wagner & Christal Quam
   c. Results:
      Team Effort Pamela Wagner & Christal Quam
   d. Discussion:
      Team Effort Pamela Wagner & Christal Quam