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## **A closer look at the professional relationship of children's social workers and teachers in regard to the education of foster children**

Marnae Latrice Potts

Koumay Yang

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A CLOSER LOOK AT THE PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIP OF  
CHILDREN'S SOCIAL WORKERS AND TEACHERS IN REGARD  
TO THE EDUCATION OF FOSTER CHILDREN

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

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

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by  
Marnae Latrice Potts

Koumay Yang

June 2004

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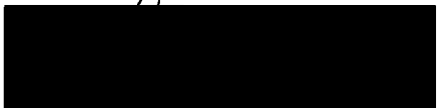
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A Project  
Presented to the  
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California State University,  
San Bernardino


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by  
Marnae Latrice Potts  
Koumay Yang  
June 2004

Approved by:

  
Dr. Laurie Smith, Faculty Supervisor  
Social Work

June 1, 04  
Date

  
Crystal Shackelford, M.S.W., Professional  
Intern Unit Coordinator, Riverside County

  
Dr. Rosemary McCaslin,  
M.S.W. Research Coordinator

## ABSTRACT

The Child Welfare and Educational systems can be instrumental in shaping a foster child's future. However, this requires a professional working relationship between teachers and children's social workers. The purpose of this research was to explore the extent of interaction between teachers and children's social workers in regard to the education of foster children. After interviewing six teachers and six children's social workers, the researchers found that there is limited interaction between the two groups in relations to the education of foster children. Further, it was found that the role of the teacher and children's social worker in the education of foster children is not clearly defined. In conclusion, this research study provides recommendations to improve the interaction between teachers and children's social workers and includes further directions for future research relating to the education of foster children.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are grateful to have had Dr. Laurie Smith as our advisor. Her time and support is greatly appreciated and irreplaceable. Furthermore, we would like to acknowledge Riverside County and the unified school district in Riverside for allowing us to conduct our research in their agencies. We especially appreciate the teacher's and children's social workers who took time out of their busy schedules to participate in the research study. In addition, we send a special thanks to Larry Payne and Crystal Shackleford who all helped to coordinate the research study within their agencies. Thanks for returning our phone calls. Last of all, but not least, we greatly appreciate our families for their support throughout our educational endeavors.

## DEDICATION

This research is dedicated to all foster children pursuing education in society today. We hope that this research project will open the gate to better child welfare and educational services for all foster children.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

The education of foster children is an issue that needs to be addressed by the school system as well as by the welfare system today. Is everything being done to ensure that foster children's educational needs are met? Are teachers and children's social workers doing their part to enhance the education of foster children? These questions and other educational issues of foster children will be addressed in this study. The study begins with a detail overview of the project. Then the problem statement defines the issues to be studied and gives the reader a clear understanding of the educational experience of the foster child. Further, the purpose of the study lets the reader know why this is such an important issue to be studied. Finally, the significance of the project for social work shows how this project can contribute to social work practice.

#### Problem Statement

Approximately 750,000 children are in the foster care system today (Simms, Dobowitz, & Szilagyi, 2000). In spite of efforts to prevent child abuse and neglect, reduce out-of-home placements through family preservation

programs, and improve the number of adoptions, a great number of children remain in the foster care system (Simms, Dubowitz, & Szilagyi, 2000). The majority of children are placed in foster care as a result of neglect, physical abuse, parental substance abuse or abandonment (Rosenfeld et al., 1997). These children face many challenges growing up in a foster home and one of those challenges is education.

Foster children are at a great risk of academic failure with the different situations they bring to the school system. The foster child experiences emotional trauma from repeated separations from caregivers, which has a powerful effect on school adjustment. In addition, the foster child often has to adjust to an educational curriculum that varies from school to school. In many cases foster children may lag months behind other children academically because of the lack of standardized curriculums and tracking systems (Kellam, 2000). Further, the repeated changing of schools disrupts the educational process and can hinder a child's learning ability. Unfortunately, a foster child may be moved several times in one year.

According to Fanshel and Shinn's study (as cited in Altshuler, 2003) when foster children are compared to

other children in similar classes, they have weaker cognitive abilities and poorer academic performance and classroom achievement. These difficulties lead many foster children to experience grade retention and to be placed in special education more frequently than other children, according to George and Van Voorhis (1992). In addition, Smucket and Kauffman (1996) report that foster children display inappropriate school-related behaviors more frequently, have poorer school attendance records, and change schools more often than other children.

Poor educational functioning in foster care can lead to poor adult functioning. According to Pilling's study (as cited in Altshuler, 2003) foster children who do not graduate from high school are less likely than others who do graduate to be employed, maintain stable housing, have leisure interests, or feel satisfied with their lives. They are also less likely to have high levels of self-sufficiency, including the ability to keep stable housing and full-time employment (Cheung & Health, 1994). A study of adult functioning after foster care has shown the importance of academic success for employment, self-sufficiency, and self-esteem (Aldgate, Health, Colton, & Simm, 1993).

Despite the fact that most foster children attend public schools, public school teachers and children's social workers experience some difficulties in working together. Studies show that teachers and children's social workers have different focal points when working with foster children (Altshuler, 2003). Teachers tend to focus more on the education and behavior of the foster child in the classroom. In comparison, children's social workers focus on the foster child's physical and developmental needs. Further, children's social workers also concentrate on maintaining links with the foster child's birth family, Frances (2000).

A study by Fletcher-Campbell (1998) suggested that one of the causes of foster children's poor academic achievement is the lack of planning and support by both the welfare and educational systems. In other words, little planning and coordination takes place regarding the educational needs of the foster child. There is no clear definition of teacher and children's social worker responsibilities when it comes to the education of foster children; which may be a key factor in promoting better educational outcomes.

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to take a closer look at the professional relationship between teachers and children's social workers in regard to the education of foster children. It was hoped that greater awareness of the respective roles that these professionals have in educating foster children would enhance the education of foster children. The opinions of both teachers and children's social workers were analyzed in regard to how they perceived their role in the education of foster children.

The study further analyzed how teachers and children's social workers address the educational needs of the foster child. According to a study by Ayasse (1995), a children's social worker often assumes that when a child is placed in foster care the school and foster parents will provide the foster child with an educational plan. In contrast, the school system often assumes that the foster parents are knowledgeable about the foster child and can assist the child with school requirements and advocate for special needs. However, in many cases the assumption by both the children's social worker and school system is not correct. Therefore, this study endeavored to get a better understanding of the role teachers and children's social

workers actually fulfill in the education of the foster child.

To achieve the purpose of this study, these issues were addressed using a qualitative method. According to Grinnell (2001), qualitative research focuses on the facts of nature as they occur under natural conditions and emphasizes qualitative description and generalization; it is a process of discovery sensitive to holistic and ecological issues. The data were collected through twelve interviews with teachers and children's social workers of Riverside County. The researchers desired to get descriptive data based on spoken words. This interview process allowed the researchers to be interactive in the data collection process. The researchers were able to gain a clear understanding and interpretation of research participant's responses as compared to using a quantitative method where interpretation and responses would have been limited.

#### Significance of the Project for Social Work

This study can contribute to social work practice by focusing on the professional relationship between teachers and children's social workers, which will ultimately lead to better educational outcomes of foster children. It is



anticipated that, through this study, teachers and children's social workers in Riverside County will become more aware of the problems that exist. It is further hoped that both professional groups will gain a better understanding of each other's role in regard to the education of foster children. It is also hoped that the gap that exists between the two systems will be narrowed.

The findings of this study have the potential to create more awareness of the educational needs of foster children among teachers and children's social workers. In addition, this study may create more job opportunities for a school liaison such as school social worker. When the school system realizes the role that the school social worker can play in the life of the foster child, they may consider employing more school social workers as liaisons.

The assessment phase of the generalist intervention process will be enhanced by this study. Assessment is the process of gathering information about a problem so that decisions can be made in order to solve the problem. Through assessment the variables that affect the working relationship of teachers and children's social workers were determined and investigated. In the long run this study may influence the school system and child protective services to come together and develop an educational

assessment for foster children, which can enhance their education. The research question that was addressed in this study is the following: To what extent and in what ways do teachers and children's social workers interact in order to enhance the education of foster children, and what roles do they play in the education of foster children?

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Introduction

The literature review revealed three main themes that highlighted the need for this study. The first centers on the foster child's experience of being removed from their biological parents to a foster home. This theme included the emotional effects that hinder the foster child's ability to learn. The second theme identified factors that limit the successful educational outcomes of the foster child. It revealed the need for teachers and children's social workers to look at their role in enhancing the education of foster children. The third theme clarified the need for collaboration and change between children's social workers and teachers as well as agencies' policies. The studies from which these themes emerged are discussed below. This chapter ends with a discussion of the conceptualization which guided the study and formed its purpose.

#### A Foster Child's Experience from Removal to Placements

Foster care children are dependents of the court or the state that were removed, usually involuntarily, from

their biological parents because of (a) serious physical harm, (b) failure to protect, (c) serious emotional damage, (d) sexual abuse, (e) severe physical abuse (minor under five), (f) conviction-another child's death, (g) no provision for support, (h) freed for adoption, (i) cruelty and/or (j) sibling abuse. The children are then placed in a foster home and are expected to adapt to their new environments (Gustavsson, 1991). The most common causes for removal of the child are physical abuse, sexual abuse and neglect (Geroski & Knauss, 2000).

Foster children display different behaviors that are based on the type of abuse prior to placement. For example, neglected children demonstrate a variety of behaviors such as failure to thrive (Simms, 1991) and have difficulties in academic and cognitive performance (Geroski & Knauss, 2000). Physically abused children use negative behavior to get attention by asserting power over adults (Geroski & Knauss, 2000). These negative behaviors include rough play, negative verbalizations and aggression (Haskett & Kistner, 1991). Sexually abused children express emotional distress externally and internally, such as in aggression, anger, hyperactivity, depression, anxiety and withdrawal (James, 1999).

Several studies indicated that once the child is removed from their biological parent(s), the foster child experiences a second trauma being placed in a foster home (Geroski & Knauss, 2000; Marcus, 1991; Simms, 1991). Unfortunately, on average a foster child changes placements at least three times (Noble, 1997).

#### Factors that Limit Successful Educational Outcomes

There was a wide range of views as to why foster children perform poorly in school. Research has found that instability of placements, foster children's emotional disturbance, ability to learn, and structural issues such as the disparate functions of the foster care system and education system all may hinder successful educational outcomes.

Behavior problems and the impermanence of home life in foster care impact the foster child's ability to function in school (Ayasse, 1995). A study by Altshuler (1997) suggested that children in foster care not only struggle to succeed in school, but also face the challenges of changes in their living situation, knowledge of removal from the home because of abuse and neglect by parents, uncertainties about their parents and their future living arrangements, and the difficulty of

overcoming the experience of abuse and neglect. Those social and emotional disturbances have a powerful effect on many foster children's ability to learn.

Francis (2000) found that school procedures were inadequate to properly support the education of foster children who move frequently. The school records were often incomplete and vague and detailed attendance records of many children were not on file.

The Smucket and Kauffman study further implied that the special-education needs of foster children are not being appropriately addressed. The reason for this was that children's social workers focused on protecting foster children rather than meeting their educational needs (George & Van Voorhis, 1992). The data obtained from Francis (2000) also supported this finding. Francis found that the education of the foster child is not the children's social worker's highest priority. The children's social worker's top priority was to maintain a linkage with the foster child's birth family. However, studies also show that when schools and child protective agencies work together they can provide a supportive role in enhancing and reshaping the foster child's future.

A study by Fletcher-Campbell (1998) conducted in England and Wales suggested that the education of children

in foster care must be examined at the national, local, institutional and individual levels so that young children who come into care would receive a positive educational experience. Some of the problems Fletcher-Campbell (1998) found were inadequate understanding by schools of the foster care system and its effect on individual pupils, little awareness of the importance of education to the fulfillment of care plans, lack of training or guidance to help social workers and care givers work together, and conflicting interdepartmental policies and practices within local authorities. This study further suggests that these problems would continue because of the stereotypes of foster children as low achievers, inadequate information and communication management within the department, tensions within interagency and inter-professional collaboration, and lack of liaison and practice regarding the external environment (Fletcher-Campbell, 1998).

A study by Francis (2000) found that attitudes and perceptions of professionals and caretakers were one of the barriers to good progress in education. A study conducted by Altshuler (2003) found that from the perspectives of children's social workers and students in foster care, teachers often treated the student

differently than other students. Studies conducted by Brodie (2000) and Altshuler (2003) found that poor planning, lack of communication and lack of a liaison between educators and children's social workers stood in the way of foster children's academic advancement. A study by Gustavsson (1991) suggested that regular contact between the school and foster parents was important because the school needed to be aware of the child's difficulties at home.

The factors that limit successful educational outcomes are clearly highlighted. There appeared to be a combination of factors, such as instability of placement, behavior of the children and the lack of services from the foster care system and educational system. The need for professionals to integrate and make changes is indicated to better assist each foster child's unique situation.

#### A Call for Collaboration and Changes from Professionals

The collaboration between teachers and children's social workers may assist foster children in making their educational experience more successful despite the obstacles. A study completed by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) suggested that effective practice via partnership at national, local, institutional



and individual level between the education and foster care system is more likely to ensure successful and positive educational outcomes (Fletcher-Campbell, 1998).

A study by Ritter and Sacks (1995) explored how school social workers and children's protective services (CPS) can collaborate in order to improve the social and educational functioning of maltreated children in kinship care. This study suggested that a collaboration model between CPS and school social workers using provisions of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) can help improve the education of foster children in-out-home placement.

According to the IDEA, the program offered both schools and CPS a way to develop a partnership to serve maltreated children. Under the model, CPS social workers first identified maltreated children placed in kinship care to the school social worker who would then conduct prescreening services under IDEA. The model was not only effective with children in kinship care but also was effective with children in foster care in general.

Altshuler's study (2003) focused on the barriers to successful collaboration between the public school and child welfare system. She suggested that the two systems work together to better the educational experience of

foster children. Altshuler (2003) found that both the public school system and the welfare system were eager to work together more collaboratively despite their differences, but she indicated that the two systems needed to resolve their historical mistrust. This mistrust is due to a lack of understanding regarding confidentiality limitations.

From Altshuler's (2003) interviews, she found that educators felt frustrated that caseworkers would withhold vital information that could be used for successful educational planning for foster children. Social workers, on the other hand, felt frustrated that educators expected the confidential information to be disclosed when it is nonessential.

Altshuler's (2003) study further suggested that educational systems and school social workers can work together to provide children in foster care a safe haven by offering a stable, consistent, accepting, and predictable environment in which they can thrive. Altshuler recommends that the school social worker needed to focus his/her attention on supportive intervention at the macro and micro levels because this would help the foster child to maximize his/her stability to learn within the school setting. Furthermore, the school agency and

child welfare system needed to make a commitment to provide educational opportunities to the foster child with behavioral and emotional problems.

Francis's study (2000) suggested that collaboration should be the foundation of policy strategy and would be required at different levels. Policy would require the exchange of information between social worker and teacher as well as at the state and administrative level. Fletcher-Campbell's (1998) study suggested that the problem between schools and the welfare system is the same nation wide because of the nature of the welfare system.

Several studies have been done on the problems that foster children face in the school system. However, Ayasse's study (1995) focused on programs which help foster children by expanding and advocating for appropriate school placement, academic tutoring, counseling, coordination of services, and guidance toward independent living. These programs were found to be beneficial in facilitating academic progress, and helping students to successfully graduate from high school (Ayasse, 1995).

Support for partnership is needed from all levels of management starting with the educational institution and social services (Fletcher-Campbell, 1998). Research has

shown that the collaboration between two agencies is more likely to result in successful outcomes.

### Theories Guiding Conceptualization

This study focused on the school system and foster care system in regard to education of foster children. Systems theory and the ecological perspective were used to guide and shape this study.

A systems approach interpreted the organization as a social system with interrelated parts, or subsystems, functioning in interaction and equilibrium with each other (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2001). The school settings were the organizations that were studied. Children's social workers and teachers are subsystems that play roles in the organizations. The interactions among these two groups of people were studied to determine the obstacles they faced in working together on behalf of foster children. In addition, ways to improve the interactions among these two groups were explored in order to enhance the education of foster children.

The relationship between the teachers and social workers was a focus of assessment. According to Zastrow and Kirst-Ashman (2001), a professional relationship is developed so communication and interaction can help meet

the child's needs. In order to assess the relationship between the educational system and children's welfare system, the obstacles must be understood from the perspectives of the professionals who make direct contact with the foster child. A study needed to be conducted into the perspectives of the educators and social workers.

The ecological perspective guided this study to view the individual in his/her environment as a unitary, interacting system in which each constantly affects and shapes the other (Constable, McDonald, & Flynn, 2002). The theory guided the study in focusing on how the teacher and children's social worker perceived the importance of the education of foster children. The ecological perspective placed an emphasis on the individual and other important macro system. Together systems theory and the ecological perspective guided the conceptualization of this study focused on systems in their natural environment (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2001).

### Summary

The literature review highlighted the foundation for this research guided by systems theory and the ecological perspective. The first theme detailed the emotional challenges of the foster children that affect their

ability to learn. The second theme detailed the factors that limit the foster children's ability to be successful in school. These factors ranged from placement instability to lack of services provided to the foster children. This led to the last theme, collaboration between professionals and agencies is needed to enhance the education of foster children.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODS

#### Introduction

Chapter Three covers the study design, sampling, data collection and instruments, and procedures for the protection of human subjects. This section also details the procedures, limitations, and time frame in which the data was collected.

#### Study Design

The study used a qualitative research method to yield descriptive data. Snowball sampling was used to locate the sample. An unstructured interview was then conducted.

The qualitative research approach was designed to study a social phenomenon within its context (Grinnell, 2001). This research design aimed to study the in-depth details of the interaction between children's social workers and teachers in regard to the education of foster children. A qualitative approach is appropriate to uncover problem areas of children's social workers and teachers interactions and perceptions through the unstructured interview. The qualitative method had its limitations due to the fact that the number of participants was small and may not have represented the population.

The method of snowball sampling was used to capture different perspectives of the topic. Grinnell (2001) defines this sampling method as a non-probability sampling procedure in which participants of the sample are asked to identify other individuals from the population. The sample solely depends on the individual that the researcher first interviewed. It can not be determined to what degree the snowball sampling would represent the population (Grinnell, 2001).

The interviewing process had several strengths in identifying the perception of children's social workers and teachers. This process allowed participants to express their opinion freely and identify barriers. In addition, the interviews allowed participants to suggest solutions to the barriers that they were facing.

There were two researchers that were present during the interviews to ensure that the data recorded was accurate, however; there were limitations to the interview process. First, the interview process could be biased since it was interpreted and analyzed by the researchers only no statistical testing was conducted. In addition, the process of recording the information was difficult in that the researchers could not record some of the exact wording of the interviewee.



### Sampling

The sample consisted of six children's social workers and six teachers who work directly with foster children. A snowball sampling procedure was used to select the sample for a divergent perspective.

The children's social workers were employees of Riverside County. These children's social service workers were assigned to the following adjudicated programs: family reunification, family maintenance, and planned permanent living arrangement and they are on-going workers that assess and provide services for the foster child.

The six children's social workers were selected based on the number of years of employment with the Department. From each adjudicated program, one children's social worker was selected who had been employed by Riverside County for more than two years and another worker was selected who had been employed two years or less.

Riverside County's Department of Children's Services management approved the study prior to interviewing the children's social workers. Approval required that a statement of purpose be submitted to the liaison of Riverside County.

The six teachers from a unified school district in Riverside County were selected from each educational level

which includes elementary school, middle school, and high school. The teachers were chosen based on the requirement that the teacher has or had contact with a foster child. Larry Payne, who works for Riverside Office of Education contacted a Unified School District in Riverside County that was willing to participate in the study. The Assistant Superintendent reviewed and approved the study. However, the unified school district has requested to remain anonymous.

#### Data Collection and Instruments

The data for this research was collected through an unstructured interview process. Unstructured interviews consist of a series of questions that allow flexibility for both the participants and researchers to change during the interview process (Grinnell, 2001). However, the agencies allowed limited changes.

In order to explore the research question the following areas of inquiry were used to guide the interview process: teachers and social workers roles in the education of foster children, the interaction of teachers and social workers, training, and confidentiality. Demographic questions such as number of years of employment were included in the study also.

## Procedures

The data for this study was collected through an interview process conducted by the researchers. The interviews were first conducted with the adjudicated children's social workers of Riverside County. The interviews of the children's social workers were conducted during fall quarter 2003. All interviews were conducted in a closed room at a designated site within Riverside County in order to ensure confidentiality.

Data was also collected from teachers of a certain school district in Riverside County. The teacher's interviews were conducted during fall and winter quarters 2003/2004. Fall and winter quarters were chosen out of consideration for teacher's heavy workload. The teacher's interviews were also held in an enclosed room in order to ensure confidentiality. These interviews were held at a designated spot in the Riverside school district. The interview process lasted at least one hour in length.

## Protection of Human Subjects

The agencies and CSUSB's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the study, interview questions, informed consent, and debriefing. All interviews were conducted by direct questioning (see Appendix A) and were kept

anonymous. The interview participants were asked to read an informed consent before they voluntarily participated in the study. The participants were informed that the interviews were voluntary and that they could withdraw their consent to participate or discontinue participation at any time.

The informed consent was not to be signed but each participant was asked to place an X on the signature line in order to protect their anonymity (see Appendix B). They were also asked to provide a valid date. In compliance with the regulations of the IRB, California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB), the researchers will maintain the copies of the informed consent forms and data for a minimum of three years. In addition, the participants were given a debriefing statement at the conclusion of each interview. The debriefing statement included the names of the researchers and the advisor with phone numbers for the participant to make contact if they had any questions or concerns (see Appendix C).

### Data Analysis

The data from this study was analyzed through using cross-sectional indexing. The central ideal of cross-sectional indexing is that a uniform set of indexing

categories is systematically applied to the data (Mason, 1997). The data analysis started with three main categories, which are knowledge of roles, training, and interaction. As the data was analyzed the researchers looked for other categories/themes. The data was coded using a highlighter system. A different color highlighter was used to identify the data pertaining to each indexing category. Then the data was explained using descriptive explanation. A descriptive explanation involves the construction of some kind of explanatory account of what is going on in a particular social setting, or the operation of a set of social processes (Mason, 1997). The goal was to interpret the data in a way that the true expressions of the participants were revealed.

A descriptive research level of questioning was used to find out how teachers and social workers interact. Were their interactions beneficial to the foster child in relation to education? Further, descriptive research was used to find out how teachers and social workers dealt with the issue of confidentiality. Did the issue of confidentiality create a barrier in the professional relationship of teachers and children social workers? Descriptive research was also used to describe what teachers and children's social workers believe are the

barriers that exist between the two professions. Descriptive level of research questioning allowed precision in defining the problem areas and a description of relationship between children's social workers and teachers as related to the education of foster children.

### Summary

The method selected for this study was designed to assess the perceptions of teachers and children's social workers on their professional relationship in regards to the education of foster children. The research was a qualitative design with a descriptive level of research questioning to gain a better understanding of the interaction between teachers and children's social workers. The data was collected through an interview process to evaluate knowledge of roles, training, and interaction between teachers and children social workers of Riverside County in the education of foster children. Cross-sectional indexing with a highlighter system was used to analyze the data.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESULTS

#### Introduction

Chapter four consists of an analysis of the data collected in this research study. The data is presented according to four different themes which are role, training, interaction and education of foster children. This data was used to answer the following research questions: To what extent and in what ways do teachers and children's social workers interact in order to enhance the education of foster children and what roles do they play in the education of foster children? In addition, this chapter includes a demographic description of the sample used for the study.

#### Presentation of the Findings

The sample consisted of six children's social workers and six teachers. The children's social workers were employees of Riverside County and the teachers were employed with a unified school district within Riverside County. The six children's social workers were selected based on the number of years of employment with the Department. From each adjudicated program, one children's social worker was selected who had been employed by

Riverside County for more than two years and another worker was selected who had been employed two years or less. The six teachers were chosen from each educational level which includes elementary school, middle school, and high school with the requirement of current or past contact with a foster child.

#### Analyses of Children's Social Worker Data

##### Perception of Role

Analysis of data relating to roles indicated that the children's social worker role in the education of foster children is very limited. Most of the children's social workers suggested that they would only intervene in the education of foster children when a behavior or educational problem is brought to their attention. One children's social worker indicated that if "everything is okay" then the educational needs of the foster child would not be addressed. However, once the children's social worker becomes aware of an educational problem with the foster child, he or she will talk with the foster child's teacher, school administrator or school counselor in order to get an understanding of the child's needs.

It was further found that with elementary school students the children's social worker is more likely to



intervene with the teacher and with middle school and high school students the children's social worker is more likely to intervene with the guidance counselor. In considering the foster child's needs the children's social worker may review the academic history of the foster child or the reason for the removal of the foster child. Then the children's social worker may refer the foster child for appropriate services such as tutoring if necessary. In addition, a children's social worker may refer the foster child for proper testing. A children's social worker may also attend an IEP or SST meeting on behalf of the foster child.

### Training

The researchers found that the children's social workers interviewed had little or no training in assessing the educational needs of the foster child. Further, they did not even have training on the role that the children's social worker plays in the education of foster children. All of the children's social workers except one agreed that training is something that is needed. The one children's social worker who disagreed indicated that training is not necessary, because the role of the children's social worker is to assess the stability of placement and welfare of the foster child. This worker

believed that it is the teacher's role to assess the educational needs of the foster child.

The children's social workers gave several recommendations for training in such areas as the function of the school, the roles of children's social workers in terms of education and boundaries and the assessment of educational needs of foster children. Other recommendations included training on such topics as cultural issues, the expectation of school and foster parents, services available through school, the protocol and process of IEP, and tutoring and funding available for support services.

The children's social worker's recommended several different venues in which the training could take place. Two of the children's social workers suggested that training take place at a staff development or unit meeting through the supervisor. Another children's social worker implied that training should take place in a class setting during the orientation process. It was also indicated that there should also be more formal training through the children's social worker's academic program. Yet another children's social worker indicated that a workshop or guest speaker to explain the educational boundaries of children's social workers would be valuable.

Some of the children's social workers also suggested when the training should take place. For example, one children's social worker recommended that the training be mandatory at least once a year. Another children's social worker indicated that training should be at most a two hour training after a children's social worker has been working in the field.

#### Interaction with Teachers

The researchers found that among the children's social workers interviewed, very limited interaction takes place with teachers. When interaction does take place it is mostly due to behavioral or educational concerns in regard to the foster child. One children's social worker indicated that a foster child's teacher would not be contacted unless there was a complaint by either the foster parent or foster child. Further, the children's social workers interviewed also sometimes interact with teachers to obtain progress reports or report cards. However, this information along with attendance records is mainly obtained from the school's records office. Other situations in which these children social worker's may interact with teachers include: mistreatment of foster child at school or in placement, inquiring about

socialization of foster child and complaints of the foster child in regard to teacher.

Five of the six children's social workers indicated that they were satisfied with the teacher response received in regard to the education of foster children. However, only 2 of the children's social workers stated that they feel good about interacting with teachers. The other children's social workers were not so positive about their interaction with teachers.

One children's social worker shared that there is a limited focus on the education of the foster child that leads to limited interaction between children's social workers and teachers. Another children's social worker stated that teachers are sometimes difficult to reach, therefore; he/she contacts the school counselors for information on the foster child. Two of the children's social workers indicated that the interaction between teacher and children's social worker should be a requirement and emphasized more. They also indicated that teachers should be used as resources for the foster child.

The children's social workers interviewed were able to give some examples of helpful interactions and examples of interactions that were not so helpful. Most of the children's social workers indicated that the most helpful

interactions were those where the teacher and children's social worker were able to work together in order to get appropriate educational services for the foster child. In contrast, the teachers shared several not so helpful interactions such as, teachers being too involved with the foster child and asking too many questions, teachers lacking sensitivity toward the foster child after learning child's history and situation, teachers expecting change in foster child's behavior too soon, lack of communication, and teachers being resistant to children's social worker speaking with foster child.

Another aspect of interaction is confidentiality, therefore; the children's social workers were questioned about the issue of confidentiality with teachers. All of the children's social worker's shared that they give teachers limited information regarding the foster child on a "needs to know basis." One children's social worker stated that confidentiality is not defined clearly between teacher's and children's social workers so he/she gives very limited information. The information given to teachers through these children's social workers is only information pertaining to the particular issues at hand. Most of the children's social workers interviewed

indicated that they have no difficulties addressing the issue of confidentiality with teachers.

#### Foster Children's Educational Needs

When the children's social workers were asked if they thought that the educational needs of foster children were being met, all except one children's social worker stated that the educational needs of foster children are not being met. The most common response to why the educational needs of foster children not being met amongst these children's social workers was the instability of placement of foster children that creates gaps in their education. Another common response amongst the children's social workers was the lack of educational services for foster children. In addition, the lack of involvement of foster parents in the education of the foster child was given as an answer to why foster children's educational needs are not being met.

#### Analysis of Teacher Data

##### Perception of Role

The researchers found that most teachers interviewed believed that they play a critical role in the educational experience of foster children. However, the majority of the teachers indicated that most of the time they were

unaware of foster children enrolled in their class unless a foster child disclosed his/her status. Both the high school and middle school teachers indicated that some foster children reveal their status through journal writing and other writing assignments. On the other hand, the elementary teachers indicated that foster children status is sometimes revealed through the foster child's emergency card.

Some of the teachers interviewed reported that once they became aware of a student being a foster child, they were more sensitive to the student's situation. This sensitivity included flexibility in turning in homework and modification of homework assignments. Some teachers reported that flexibility varies from foster child to foster child based on the stability of the foster child's home life. All the teachers reported that they treat all students the same regardless of their status in terms of fairness.

Though most of the teachers are sensitive to the foster child, the teachers shared that it is not their role to deal with a foster child's behavior problems. In this situation the teachers indicated that the counselor or school psychologist would deal with the behavior

problems. All the teachers stated that their role in the education of foster children is to teach the foster child.

### Training

The researchers found that the teachers had no specific training in regard to assessing the education of foster children. However, most teachers felt that training on how to assess the education of foster children is not needed. However, five out six teachers suggested that knowledge of the child welfare system is needed. The teachers suggested that the training can consists of such topics as process of child welfare, needs and support system of a foster child, different teaching approaches with a foster child, and the rights of foster children and foster parents.

The teachers interviewed had several recommendations for training. Most of the teachers suggested that the school district could provide training through a staff person from the child welfare department. One of the teachers suggested that a class on child welfare could be offered as part of the credential process or continuous education credit. It was also recommended that the roles of the teacher in regard to the education of a foster child be clarified. In addition, one of the teachers recommended that a legislation change is needed so that



teachers can be informed of a foster child's status. This teacher also suggested an educational plan needs to be developed, a way found to ensure that it follows the foster child from school to school.

### Interaction

Three of the six interviewed teachers reported past interaction with a children's social worker. These teachers reported to have limited interactions. All the teachers implied that they usually interact with the foster child's foster parent or with a staff person when the child is placed in a group home. A few of the teachers reported that they have interacted with probation officers. Further, the teachers who reported that they had no interaction with children's social workers also indicated that they were not aware that they could contact the children's social worker. Most of the teachers assumed that the children's social worker interacts with counselors or an administrative staff person in regard to problems of foster children.

The teachers interviewed reported that interaction between teachers and children's social workers is needed to improve the educational experience and understand the educational needs of a foster child, especially with those foster children who are failing and/or having behavior

problems. Of the teachers who did have some contact with children's social workers only one was satisfied with the interaction, but felt that the interaction could have occurred with the school counselors. This teacher shared that there is not a need to deal directly with the social worker. One teacher indicated that he/she was not satisfied with the interaction because of the limited services offered to assist the foster child's educational needs.

In regard to confidentiality, most of the teachers felt that some of the foster child's background information is needed to be able to appropriately educate the child. Most of the teachers stated that they understand the importance of confidentiality and believed that it's not necessary to disclose all the information of the foster child. However, all of the teachers interviewed indicated that information that directly affects the student's ability to be educated should be disclosed.

#### Foster Children's Educational Needs

The researchers found that most of the teachers interviewed felt that the educational needs of foster children are not being met. The majority of the teachers felt that instability of placement, which contributes to the foster child being exposed to different school

curriculums, makes it difficult to meet and address the foster child's educational needs. Some of the teachers also indicated that the foster child's educational needs are not being met because of the lack of an appropriate support system. Overall, all the teachers implied that they believe that educational opportunities are available to all foster children.

### Summary

This section gave an overview of the data collected for this research project. All of the children's social worker's and teacher's interview responses were briefly summarized to answer the research question: To what extent and in what ways do teachers and children's social workers interact in order to enhance the education of foster children and what roles do they play in the education of foster children? This information will be used in the next chapter to discuss whether the research question was answered and other implications of the findings.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSION

#### Introduction

Chapter five is an overview of the significance of the research findings. The findings suggest clarification of roles and responsibilities that impact both macro and micro practice. In addition, this chapter includes any unanticipated findings and limitations of the research that may affect the significance of the findings. The chapter ends with recommendations for social work practice, policies and research.

#### Discussion

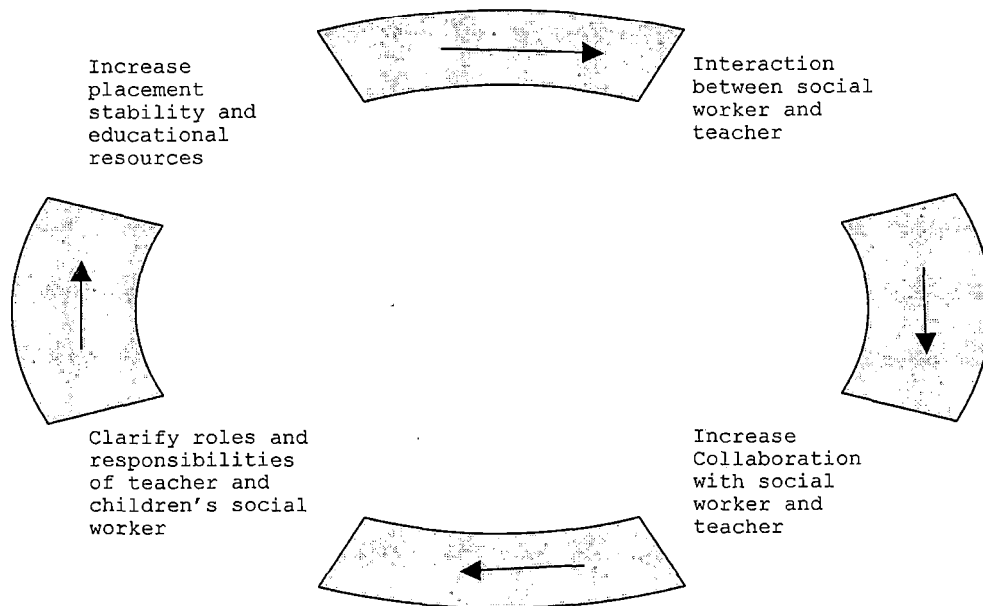
##### Placement of Foster Children

Both teachers and children's social workers reported instability of placement as an obstacle to the foster child's educational achievement. The literature on foster children performing poorly in school supports the fact that impermanence of home life is one of the problems that hinders successful educational outcomes (Ayasse, 1995).

One of the reasons for instability of placement may be due to the foster child's behavioral problems in school which leads to suspension. In this situation the foster parent maybe inconvenienced by having to make additional

child care arrangements. However, the foster child's behavioral problems in home may also lead to instability of placement. To ensure that the foster child's education is consistent, the school system needs to develop more alternative consequences to deal with the foster child's negative behaviors rather than out of school suspension. For example, the school can provide in-school suspension or offer counseling services to deal with the behavior problems.

The researchers believe that there should be an increase of interaction between children's social workers and teachers to ensure that the foster child's educational needs are met at school as well as in placement. This can increase support for both the foster child and foster parent. For example, foster parents can get direction in dealing with the foster child's behavioral problems at school and at home which could increase the stability of placement. A general model was developed to illustrate a possible process of service delivery to increase placement stability in graph 1 on the following page.



Graph 1. Process of Service Delivery

### Interaction between Professionals

Both groups reported limited interaction with each other. A possible explanation is the lack of knowledge of each others roles and responsibilities. Further explanation for the lack of interaction maybe time constraints and work schedule conflicts. Some of the children's social workers find it much easier to talk to school counselor and psychologist, rather than the teacher, due to their work schedule conflicts and workload. Maybe it would be helpful to have a liaison, such as a school social worker, to ensure that both parties are receiving accurate information regarding the foster child's educational status and emotional needs.

An unanticipated finding was that half of the teachers interviewed had not interacted with a children's social worker. It was unexpected because most of the teachers interviewed had worked in the educational system for at least five years or more. However, the researchers found that the teachers "welcome" the interaction with the children's social worker and believed that this can contribute to increasing the foster child's educational achievement.

The researchers recommend that the social worker's phone numbers be listed on the child's emergency card and be available for the teachers. Furthermore, children's social workers should be required to contact teachers as part of case management.

#### Interaction of Teacher and Foster Child

The upper grade level teachers indicated that most of the time they were unaware of a foster child's enrollment in their classrooms. Many of these teachers reported that if they were aware of the student's foster child status, they would be flexible and supportive of the foster child's educational needs. To some degree the finding support Altshuler's (2003) study that teachers treat a foster child different from other students. Although the researchers found that the teachers were more sensitive

towards the foster child, most teachers did report treating a foster child the same as other students.

The researchers suggest using the ecological perspective to place an emphasis on the individual within their environment. A systems approach is interrelated parts, or subsystems, functioning in interaction and equilibrium with each other (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2001). It would be beneficial for teachers to view the individual in his/her environment as a unitary, interacting system in which each constantly affects and shapes the other (Constable, McDonald, & Flynn, 2002). Further, a teacher could be an additional support system for the foster child, which may lead to the foster child having a greater chance in succeeding in school.

#### Roles and Responsibilities

The differences that emerged in the two groups' responses to their role in the education of foster children may be due to the nature of their professional roles. The researchers believe that most teachers interviewed feel that their role is to teach. The children's social workers feel that their role is to ensure the foster child's safety. It may be that the children's social workers also focus on other issues of the foster child, such as behavior problems at school and



in the foster home. The researchers suggest that children's social workers be more receptive to the educational needs of the foster child. On the other hand, teachers need to advocate more for educational services for the foster child.

The difference in responses may be due to the lack of knowledge of child welfare and function of the educational system. This may be because of vague roles and responsibilities of the children's social workers and teachers. Ayasse's (1995) study supports this finding that children's social workers often assume that the foster parents will ensure that the child's educational needs are met.

The research suggested that clarifying roles and responsibilities between teachers, children's social workers and foster parents is needed. The clarification could be in the form of a policy. The researchers further suggest that the policy would need to be developed with the involvement of representatives from the educational, child welfare, and foster care systems.

### Training

The researchers found that the two groups were willing to attend training to learn more about the foster care or educational system in order to increase the chance

of the foster child succeeding in school. Despite their lack of taking responsibility in ensuring that foster children's educational needs are met, both professions are willing to collaborate for the sake of the foster child.

It is further suggested that changes may need to occur at the macro level by developing appropriate training sessions. Development and implementation of such trainings would increase knowledge of the two systems at every level of the agencies.

#### Confidentiality

Many of the teachers interviewed believed that some confidential information regarding the child affects the child's ability to learn. Therefore, being aware of the history of the child may help the teachers modify their teaching style to ensure that foster children's educational needs are being met.

Dealing with the issue of confidential is never easy. Thus, the researchers suggest that the clarification of confidentiality issues with the school system is needed. For example, a representative from the Child Welfare System could provide guidelines of confidentiality through training in the school system. Moreover, the children's social workers should receive the same guidelines for

confidentiality through a Department Memorandum and training.

#### Limitations

The individuals who developed this study also conducted the interviews which may raise some concerns regarding the findings. It was taken into account that the process of recording interview responses might decrease the reliability of the responses; therefore, two researchers were present to ensure that all the information was recorded accurately. However, the researchers found that it was difficult to hand write complete interview responses.

Furthermore, there were no guarantees that the snowball sampling fully represented the perspectives of the two groups, especially due to the small sample size, although the teachers and children's social workers were selected to represent a variety of levels of experience. In addition, all parties that are involved directly with the foster child, such as the foster parents, school counselor or psychologist, were not included in the research. If these parties were included in the research, the data collected may have different outcomes. Further, the research is strictly qualitative not quantitative,

which did not provide statistical information for common trends.

### Recommendations for Social Work Practice, Policy and Research

Numerous recommendations were made in the pervious sections of the discussion, here they are summarized. The results of this study suggest that collaborative efforts be made to clarify social worker's and teacher's role in the education of foster children due to blurred roles. The recommendations are consistent with prior literature (Altshuler, 2003; Francis, 2000; Fletcher-Campbell, 1998). The researchers suggest that training is needed to link the children's social workers to the educational system by defining their role through trainings. The trainings ought to consist of clarification of roles in relation to Independent Education Plan (IEP), juvenile law related to education, and school's educational responsibility.

In summary, the researchers found that clarification is needed in terms of children's social workers' functions, roles and as to the limitations of confidentiality with the educational system. It is hoped that this would improve the assessment of the foster child's educational needs and provide more appropriate services. The researchers recommend that it be mandatory

for social workers to meet with teachers of foster children on their caseload at least once a quarter. If this is done, it could lead to the elimination of the lack of collaboration as one of the barriers to foster children in regards to a successful educational experience.

Based on the findings of this study, the researchers suggest that further research be done on the foster child and their academic progress from the child's perspective. Furthermore, the perceptions of the foster parents are also important to appropriately develop policies and improve social work practices. Therefore, a study that includes the foster parent's perception would be valuable.

### Conclusions

The results of the study suggested both social workers and teachers thought that the educational needs of foster youth are not being met. It also suggested that more interaction between children's social workers and teachers is needed. However, policies will need to be developed to clarify roles, responsibilities and confidentiality issues. Currently, the interaction between the two groups is limited. Interaction can lead to collaboration which would allow foster children to have a more positive educational experience. In summary, the

research found that children's social workers and teachers are willing to work together to ensure that foster children's educational needs are met. This is the first step to ensuring that appropriate educational services are provided to meet the foster child's educational needs.

APPENDIX A  
QUESTIONNAIRE

## **CHILDREN'S SOCIAL WORKER**

Question 1-2 ask participant to provide information about his or her role and training.

- 1) In your experience, how do children's social workers address the educational needs of foster children on their caseload?
  - a) Does this differ by the age of the child or educational level?
  - b) Does this differ by any other characteristic of the child?
- 2) What type of training have you had in assessing the educational needs of a foster child?
  - a) Are you satisfied with the training you have been given?
  - b) What would you recommend to improve training on assessment of the educational needs of foster children?

Question 3-5 ask the participant to provide information about the interaction with teacher.

- 3) Under what circumstances do you interact with a foster child's teacher?
  - a) Could you give examples of interactions that were helpful to foster children and examples of interactions that were not helpful?
  - b) Are you satisfied with the response and services of the teacher?
  - c) What are your feelings about having to interact with the teachers?
- 4) As a children's social worker, how do you deal with the issue of confidentiality in regard to foster children and educational setting?
  - a) Do you see any problems or difficulties with this?
- 5) Do you think the educational needs of foster children are being met?
  - a) Why or why not, if not what are the barriers?
  - b) If there are barriers, what are some ways of resolving the situation?
- 6) Anything else?



## TEACHERS

Question 1-2 ask participant to provide information about his or her role and training.

- 1) In your experience, how do teachers address the educational needs of foster children in their classroom?
  - a) Does this differ by status of the student?
  - b) Does this differ by any other characteristic of the child?
- 2) What type of training have you had in assessing the educational needs of a foster child?
  - a) Are you satisfied with the training you have been given?
  - b) What would you recommend to improve training on assessment of the educational needs of foster children?

Question 3-5 ask the participant to provide information about the interaction with children's social worker.

- 3) Under what circumstances do you interact with a foster child's social worker?
  - a) Could you give examples of interactions that were helpful to foster children and examples of interactions that were not helpful?
  - b) Are you satisfied with the response and services of the children's social worker?
  - c) What are your feelings about having to interact with the children's social worker?
- 4) As a teacher, how do you deal with the issue of confidentiality in regard to foster children and educational settings?
  - a) Do you see a problem or difficulties?
- 5) Do you think the educational needs of foster children are being met?
  - a) Why or why not, if not what are the barriers?
  - b) If there are barriers, what are some ways of resolving the situation?
- 6) Anything else?

APPENDIX B  
INFORMED CONSENT

## **INFORMED CONSENT**

We, Koumay Yang and Marnae Potts, are students in the Master of Social Work Department at California State University, San Bernardino. As part of our Master of Social Work Program we are conducting a study to explore the interactions between the teacher and children's social worker in regard to the education of foster children. The Department of Social work sub-committee of the CSUSB Institutional Review Board has approved this project. Dr. Laurie Smith is supervising this project.

You are being asked to participate in an unstructured interview, which will take approximately 1 hour to complete. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. Should you choose to participate, you will remain completely anonymous, as no identifying information will be obtained. While participating in the interview feel free to withdraw at any time. You may also withdraw data collected by the interviewer if you decide to do so upon completing the interview. There are no foreseen risks in participating in this research project.

If you have any questions regarding this study please contact our advisor Dr. Laurie Smith at (909) 880-5000 x3837 or you may contact Dr. Rosemary McCaslin, the Research Coordinator, at (909) 880-5507. Thank you for your participation in this study.

By placing an X in the area below, I acknowledge that I have been fully informed and agree to participate in this study. I also acknowledge that I am at least 18 years of age.

Place an X here: \_\_\_\_\_

Today's date: \_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX C  
DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

## **DEBRIEFING STATEMENT**

The interview you have just participated in was designed to explore the working relationship of the teacher and children's social worker in regard to the education of foster children. The researchers are particularly interested in the teacher's and children's social worker's opinions of the interactions that take place between the two professions. Koumay Yang and Marnae Potts, students in the Masters of Social Work Department at California State University, San Bernardino, conducted this study.

Thank you for your participation. There are not any foreseen risk in participating in this study but, if you feel the need to speak with someone regarding feelings or issues that the interview may have provoked, contact Riverside County Department of Mental Health, Crisis Outpatient and Referral at (909) 358-4705. If you have any questions about this interview, please feel free to contact our advisor, Dr. Laurie Smith at (909) 880-3837 or Dr. Rosemary McCaslin, Research Coordinator at (909) 880-5507. The results of this study will be available in the Pfau Library at California State University, San Bernardino after June 2004.

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## ASSIGNED RESPONSIBILITIES PAGE

This was a two-person project where authors collaborated throughout. However, for each phase of the project, certain authors took primary responsibility. These responsibilities were assigned in the manner listed below.

1. Data Collection:

Team Effort: Marnae Potts & Koumay Yang

2. Data Entry and Analysis:

Team Effort: Marnae Potts & Koumay Yang

3. Writing Report and Presentation of Findings:

- a. Introduction and Literature

Team Effort: Marnae Potts & Koumay Yang

- b. Methods

Team Effort: Marnae Potts & Koumay Yang

- c. Results

Team Effort: Marnae Potts & Koumay Yang

- d. Discussion

Team Effort: Marnae Potts & Koumay Yang