Participants' perceptions on the effectiveness of the "Parents in Partnership" program of Los Angeles County

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PARTICIPANTS' PERCEPTIONS ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE "PARENTS IN PARTNERSHIP" PROGRAM OF LOS ANGELES COUNTY

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 Shaniece Anejo Hunter-Moffett
September 2011
PARTICIPANTS' PERCEPTIONS ON the EFFECTIVENESS OF

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LOS ANGELES COUNTY

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September 2011

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine participants' perceptions on the effectiveness of the "Parents in Partnership" program (PIP) of the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services. The study utilizes qualitative research methods to examine the participants' thoughts on the effectiveness of the "Parents in Partnership" program. This study revealed that both the parent mentors and the biological parent mentees saw the program as an effective and worthwhile program. Future studies are needed to evaluate whether or not outcomes and reunification rates improve as a result of this program.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my sincere thanks to the Los Angeles County Department of the Children and Family Services for allowing me to do my research on such a dynamic and innovative program. I would like to thank all of the participants in my study for taking the time out to allow me to interview them. I would like to thank Derrick Perez-Johnson and Viviana Ayala of DCFS for being such amazing mentors to me.

Finally, I would like to thank my research supervisor Dr. Davis for all his help with my study. Thank you.
DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this proposal to all my family and friends that have supported me through the MSW program. I really needed all of your love and encouragement.

I would also like to dedicate this project to any parent who has an open case with DCFS and does not know where to go for answers. I just want you to know that there are PIP's in the community that are there to help.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Problem Statement

The current focus in the field of child welfare is the placement of children in permanent and stable homes. The best way to achieve this goal is by preserving the family. The primary goal of the child welfare system is reunifying children in the foster care system with their families (Wulczyn, 1995). The universal assumption guiding child welfare policy remains the belief that children should be raised by their biological parents. Children that are raised by their biological family form stronger family bonds and develop positive self-identity at a higher rate than children that are placed in foster care (Wulczyn, 1995).

About half of the children that are placed in the child welfare system return to their parents within a year of placement (Wulczyn, 1995). Unfortunately, children that return home frequently find themselves back in the child welfare system within twelve months (Wulczyn, 1995). The state of California has numerous permanency planning programs in place to help these
families stay together. There is currently very little
data available to determine the effectiveness of these
programs.

Los Angeles County has been a leader in developing
programs that support birth parents trying to reunite
with their children. These programs are designed to not
only reunite families but to empower birth parents to
sustain positive changes that have been made once their
children are returned. One such program is the "Parents
in Partnership" program also known as the PIP program.
This program puts parents with open cases with the
Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) into a
mentorship program. The parents with open cases are
mentored by parents that have been through similar
hardships in the past. The mentors have successfully
reunified with their children and no longer have an open
case with DCFS. Essentially this program gives birth
parents the opportunity to receive additional guidance
and support from another parent that can truly empathize
with their situation.

National Association of Social Workers (NASW) states
that, "The social work research community must redouble
its efforts to develop and test the effectiveness of new
programs and treatments" (Lewis, 2005, p. 500). In an effort to evaluate the effectiveness of permanency programs, DCFS has begun to perform studies on their programs to ensure that the program is benefiting the families being served. Family based services that focus on interventions are a particular area that requires more examination (Lewis, 2005). This has become a goal of the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) in recent years. The Department of Children and family services hopes that if a child is removed from the home, that child will return to their family in a relatively short period of time.

The Department of Children and Family Services believes that a social workers primary goal is to keep birth families together whenever possible. The “Parents in Partnership” program was developed for this very purpose. This study intends to evaluate the effectiveness of the “Parents in Partnership” program (PIP). In a statement released by the Department of Children and Family Services (2010), the PIP program was described as:

Parents in Partnership is a collaborative effort between DCFS and parent partner paraprofessionals towards facilitating safe reunification and
permanency though the education, support and mentoring of birth parents. Parent partners are a committed group of parents who have been through the child welfare system and help other parents currently involved with DCFS to reunify or maintain their families. (p. 1)

The national scope of “out of home” care is vast and varies from state to state. In the 1980’s and 1990’s, more and more children were entering the child welfare system every year. According to D’Andrade and Berrick (2006), “at the end of 1986, there were approximately 280,000 children in ‘out of home’ care, that estimate had climbed to 523,000 by 2003” (p. 32). As of 2002, the average length of time a child stayed in foster care was 32 months (D’Andrade & Berrick, 2006). One factor named by D’Andrade and Berrick (2006) for the rise in the number of children in foster care was the disproportionate number of children coming into the child welfare system as opposed to those exiting the system (2006). The past seven years indicate a steady decline in the number of children in the system. In 2006 there were 552,000 children in the system and the number decreased
to an estimated 496,000 as of 2007 (Department of Children, 2010).

With California being such a large and populated state, the Southern California numbers somewhat vary from the national numbers (Department of Children, 2010). According to the Annual Condition on Children in Orange Country, an annual fact sheet on local and national statistics on children in the child welfare system, as of July 2008, 65,385 children, 0-17, were in "out of home" care in California. This is down 39% from 107,239 in July 1994 (Berelowits, 2010). These numbers indicate that the Department of Children and Family Services is making strides in the right direction to keep children in their homes. According to the DCFS fact sheet, Los Angeles County had 18,784 children in "out of home" care as of August 2010. That is down from 19,770 children in "out of home" care the previous year (Department of Children, 2010).

The current trend within child welfare to keep families together whenever possible is a direct result of the Adoption and Safe Families Act 1997. This legislation is a guiding force in modern social work practice. The policy demands that social work agencies make concerted
efforts to reunify separated families. Social workers are now expected to make reunification their top priority. This legislation is the basis for the Department of Children and Family Services policies and procedures on detaining and reunifying children and families. Now, more than ever, child welfare agencies are collectively focusing efforts on doing everything possible to prevent "out of home" placement and to reunify birth families as quickly as possible when placed in "out of home" care (D’Andrade & Berrick, 2006).

Purpose of the Study

This study focuses on participants' perceptions of the effectiveness of the PIP program. The participants in the "Parents in Partnership" program are past and present DCFS clients. The study examines both the mentors and the mentees perceptions of the effectiveness of the "Parent in Partnership" program in order to gather a comprehensive understanding of the program.

The "Parents in Partnership" program also addresses the difficulties social workers often encounter in trying to build effective relationships with parents. One of the long-standing challenges that plague child welfare
agencies is how to build trusting relationships with parents while also enforcing policy (McCroskey & Meezan, 1998). A common criticism of the child welfare system is that, "these are such disparate functions that the public child welfare system cannot do both simultaneously" (McCroskey & Meezan, 1998, p. 66). This program attempts to overcome this hurdle by developing a bridge between the social worker and the current client with the experience and knowledge of a past client. This is all done in the hopes that the current client receives the support and information necessary to make positive changes in their lives that enable them to regain custody of their children in the least amount of time.

For any program to truly be considered a success, some form of evaluation must be completed. This is done to see if the program is accomplishing the goals that it has set forth. Fiscal accountability is also necessary. Service providers are now under immense pressure to provide empirical evidence that any implemented program is also fiscally sound (Matthews & Hudson, 2001). The service agency is also ethically responsible to make sure that any program that is servicing families is doing so in a positive manner (Matthews & Hudson, 2001).
The "Parents in Partnership" program is in its infancy. At the present time there is no quantifiable information on the effectiveness of the PIP program available to build upon. For that reason, this study takes a qualitative approach to evaluation. This particular method was chosen in order to collect empirical data for a program that has yet to be assessed. Because this study explores the attitudes and feelings of parents involved in this program, a qualitative approach allows for the collection of necessary data. Participants were asked a series of open-ended questions in order to get their opinion on different aspects of the program.

Significance of the Project for Social Work

There is an ongoing shift in the direction that the Department of Children and Family Services is taking in regards to family permanency. The collective focus is on reunification. The number one priority is to help the parents make the necessary changes in their lives that allow for their children to return home. In an attempt to achieve that goal, the PIP program was carried out. Now that the PIP program has been implemented in several offices within Los Angeles County, an evaluation is
needed. Evaluating participants’ perceived effectiveness of the program gives DCFS a better idea of how well the community is receiving the program services and an understanding of any areas that need improvement. The Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) is hopeful that this program improves the process of reunification. The goal is to help families form new and healthier ways of functioning by utilizing the support and guidance of mentors who have successfully navigated through the process in the past.

This analysis focuses on the evaluation stage of the generalist model of social work in order to enhance services for families in need. The research should provide valuable information as to the feelings and opinions that the participants in the “Parents in Partnership” program have toward its usefulness. The administrative body within DCFS should be able to use this information to make future decisions regarding possible changes to the program. This research is an examination of how well the program is serving its intended population and how well they are receiving it.

The findings of this study should allow the Department of Children and Family Services to determine
if they will continue to expand this program to different regions or if changes need to be made to the structure before implementing it elsewhere. This research is an exploratory examination of the perceived effectiveness of the "Parents in Partnership" program (PIP). Additionally, this research examines if the participants feel that the PIP program was helpful to them and if they would recommend this program to other parents. It also may foster further understanding on how child welfare social workers can better help families.
CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Chapter two contains an overall understanding of child welfare past, present and future. This chapter discusses the history of child welfare as well as the current trends in the field. It is divided into sections on history, theories guiding conceptualization, policy changes, and current trends.

History of Child Welfare

A general definition of child welfare is any, "aspect of society essential for the well being of children" (Popple & Leighninger, 2008, p. 317). The child welfare system has changed a great deal over the course of time. It was not until relatively recently that the government started making policy changes to address the rights and protection of children. In the past thirty years, fundamental changes have taken place to address the issues that children and families face. Experts in the field of child welfare have begun to realize that the programs and services that are available to children and their families do have an impact on the future of those
individuals as well as society as a whole (Crosson-Tower, 2009).

Theories Guiding Conceptualization

Through the attachment research conducted by such influential theorists as John Bowlby and Mary Anisworth, social workers have discovered why staying intact is so important to families (Crosson-Tower, 2009). Attachment is said to be created through, “a consistent, reciprocal relationship between a parent and a child” (Crosson-Tower, 2009, p. 17). When this attachment is disrupted the child is put at risk for serious problems in their future (Crosson-Tower, 2009).

Along with attachment theory, object relations theory has shaped child welfare practice. In essence, this theory states that a child must develop a healthy relationship to an object, object meaning parent or caregiver. If no such relationship is formed the child may have issues developing a positive identity (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2008). This theory embraces the idea that the relationship that a caregiver has with their children is the, “primary determinant of adult personality formation” (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2008,
To insure the child grows up to become a healthy productive adult, a positive parental relationship must be established. Child welfare workers use these theories to guide their interactions with children and families. These theories have become the foundation for the belief that children should be with their biological family whenever possible and it is the duty of social workers to try and make that happen.

Policy Changes in Child Welfare

In light of this deeper understanding of the importance of attachment and children having that constant connection with a caregiver, legislation was introduced to help children have permanent home. In the last twenty years, an unprecedented amount of new legislation with the purpose of improving the lives of families was put into effect (Crosson-Tower, 2009). The implications of those policies have impacted the practice of child welfare in far reaching ways (Crosson-Tower, 2009). One particularly impactful law is The Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980. This act called for concerted and deliberate efforts to return foster children to their families whenever the situation would
permit (Courtney, 1995). This law reflected concerns over the perceived lack of consistent guidelines for children that were being cared for out of the home. Numerous child welfare workers charged that many children were removed unnecessarily when the situation at the home could have been improved with in home services (Courtney, 1995). In addition to unnecessary removals, children that were removed and placed in foster homes were being left there indefinitely (Courtney, 1995). The law was meant to improve the possibility of permanence for children that have been brought to the attention of the child welfare system. Successful family reunification was seen as the most favorable form of outcomes for all parties involved, especially the child (Courtney, 1995).

Current Trends

The overarching trend in the child welfare arena today is permanency. The child welfare system strives to balance protecting the safety and wellbeing of children that have been abused and neglected, with the belief that preservation of the family is best for the child (Kimberlin, Anthony, & Austin, 2008). Children need permanent homes, preferably with their biological family.
In most cases, DCFS makes a concerted effort to improve the parent’s ability to provide an adequate home environment in order to achieve the goal of family reunification (Kimberlin, Anthony, & Austin, 2008). For that reason, the child welfare system takes on the perspective that every family has strengths and most can be helped.

This new philosophy being implemented is called the Family Strengths Perspective. Strength-based programs focus on identifying and utilizing the strengths of a family, not its deficiencies. This practice does not ignore the issues within the family, but attempts to focus on the positives and develop solutions for the defects. This philosophy encompasses six core values about the families in the child welfare systems. These core beliefs include: all families have strengths, families are experts on themselves, families deserve to be treated with respect and dignity, families can make well-informed decision about keeping their children safe when supported, when families are involved in decision making, outcomes can improve and a team is often more capable of creative and high quality decision making than an individual (Department of Children, 2010).
There is an increasing concern among many professionals that social services need to be more rigorously tested for effectiveness before a program can be determined a success (Lewis, 2005). A variety of new family based services are being developed with that in mind (Lewis, 2005). The family first project is a family preservation program studied for its effectiveness. This service is designed to help families with children at risk for institutionalization or "out of home" care placement by providing them with preventative services in the home. The goal of the program is to keep these families together. The study interviewed 79 families to get their perceptions on the effectiveness of the program. The researchers found those that were involved in the program were able to keep their children in the home at a much higher rate than those that did not participate in the program. Identifying and recognizing the effective treatments, programs, and services is central to assisting families (Lewis, 2005).

The child welfare system continues to have challenges in developing innovative, culturally competent programs to address the barriers that exist in engaging child welfare parent clients in the planning and
implementation of their case plan (Berrick, Young, Cohen & Anthony, 2011). Peer mentor programs, described by Berrick et al. (2011) as, "programs in which parents that have successfully navigated the child welfare system and reunified with their children, mentor parents newly entering the system" are designed to address some of these barriers to engagement with the goal of improving outcomes (p. 179). A study of one such program at a non-profit organization in the bay area of California conducted focus groups with parent client mentees to better understand the mechanisms by which parent mentors might help parent clients (Berrick et al., 2011). The results of the study found that participants' responses were uniformly positive about their experience working with a parent mentor. Shared experiences, communication and support were themes identified by the participants' responses (Berrick et al., 2011). In general the participants' felt the parent mentors provided them with encouragement, emotional support and were more sensitive to their current situation than social work professionals (Berrick et al., 2011).

The principle of family reunification is a part of the American way of life and reunification is likely to
continue to be the most common way that children are expelled from the child welfare system (Wulczyn, 1995). A new program that is on the same page as the trend in child welfare today is the "Parents in Partnership" program. Parents in Partnership (PIP) "is a collaborative effort between the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) and parent partner paraprofessionals toward facilitation of safe reunification and permanency through the education, support and mentoring of birth parents" (Department of Children, 2010, para 1). The program’s sole goal is the timely and safe reunification of children with their families. This is accomplished by pairing birth parents that have recently had their children placed in "out of home" care, with parent mentors that have successfully negotiated the child welfare system.

The "Parents in Partnership" program (PIP) is a family preservation service. These types of services are designed to help families in crisis or at serious risk of being split (McCroskey & Meezan, 1998). The major goal of family preservation services are to, "prevent foster care placement, or help reunify families after a child has entered placement by improving parenting skills and
providing follow-up services" (McCroskey & Meezan, 1998, p. 58). The hope is that the parents can learn from their mentors and have a good model of what needs to be done for reunification to take place. The parent mentees receive support services, referrals and knowledge of the child welfare system.

The program was launched in Los Angeles County in 2006 with a grant from the Annie E. Casey Foundation. This private foundation was established in 1948 by Jim Casey. The foundation's purpose is to, "help ensure that every child has a safe, nurturing, and permanent family" (Annie E. Casey, 2010, Para. 1). The Annie E. Casey foundation provided DCFS with a technical assistance grant to develop and implement a birth parent engagement program and "Parents in Partnership" was born.

There are currently four offices open that are using the PIP program. Those offices include Lakewood, Palmdale, Lancaster, and Belvedere. Expansion plans include the Pomona, El Monte, Metro North, and Santa Clarita offices within the next year.

Presently, there is a lack of evidence-based studies on the effectiveness of family preservation programs. The present study hopes to expand on the current research in
this area. Due to the program being in its infancy stage, research has yet to be conducted on the perceived effectiveness of the program.

Summary

This chapter provides information on the current state of the child welfare system. Historical trends and tendencies have been discussed. As demonstrated by the literature, the goal of keeping families has become a greater priority over time. This chapter also highlighted the need for evidence based studies of new intervention programs.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

This section includes a comprehensive description of research methodology and procedures that were utilized in conducting this study. The study design, sampling methods, data collection, procedures, methods for data analysis and the protection of human subjects is explored.

Study Design

This study is in response to the lack of empirical data available evaluating the "Parents in Partnership" program. The purpose of the study is to decipher and understand the participants' perceptions on the effectiveness of the "Parents in Partnership" program within Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS).

The research method employed in this study is qualitative research design. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with the participants in the PIP program. After some deliberation, it was determined that this would be the most effective means of gathering information on the
perceptions of the participants’ in the PIP program. This technique allows the interviewer to seek clarification to ambiguous answers and to observe any non-verbal behaviors that may be exhibited by the interviewee. However, due to the time constraints and the in-depth nature of the interviews, only fourteen participants were recruited for this study.

There were some limitations in using the qualitative method. One such limitation was the use of non-probability sampling. The sample could not be chosen at random because the focus of this study is strictly on participants in the PIP program. The type of sampling employed was convenience sampling. In using this type of sampling, there is inherently going to be a degree of sampling error. This qualitative approach yields subjective data and the relatively small sample size inhibits the ability to reach wide-ranging conclusions.

Sampling

As previously stated, the sample for this study was made of fourteen participants in the PIP program. Both mentors and mentees were interviewed. Seven from each group were asked a series of questions in an effort to
gather information on their feelings about the effectiveness of the PIP program. Participants consisted of thirteen females and one male. The participants ranged in ages from 22 to 47 years old.

In order to collect participants for the study, a convenience sample was utilized. Leaders within the PIP program were contacted in an effort to find persons willing to be a part of the study.

In order to participate in the PIP program, a mentor must have worked with the PIP program for at least six months, currently has direct contact with mentees, cannot be on a hold and has attended psycho education groups. Criteria for the mentees include that they must be over the age of 18, they have DCFS involvement either voluntary or involuntary, and have attended a PIP orientation. From those willing to participate, seven mentors and seven mentees from that pool were selected to take part in the interview process. This was done in an effort to increase the randomization of the sampling group and increase generalizability.
Data Collection and Instruments

The current study collected data by way of face-to-face interviews. Participants were asked to consent for the interview to be tape recorded by the interviewer. The interviewer used an interview guide containing approximately ten questions. Two sets of interview guides were developed: one for the mentors and another for the mentees. This was done in an effort to obtain information relevant to their roles within the program.

The interview guide was comprised of open-ended questions. This was done in the hopes of soliciting the most comprehensive and compelling responses possible. The interview guide for the mentors begins with questions pertaining to their perceptions about what is working with the program. The guide then turns its attention to things that are not working in the program, followed by ideas for improving the program. Examples of question on the mentors interview guide are: what components of the program do they feel are working? What could be added to the program to make it more effective? What population would be best served by this program?
The interview guide for the mentees investigates if they have retained a better understanding of DCFS and how to navigate that system. The interview guide for the mentees includes the following questions: How has your understanding of DCFS system changed since going to orientation? How well do you understand your rights as a parent after attending an orientation and do you feel the PIP program could better serve parents in your community? The purpose of the interview guide was to extract from the participants an honest and critical evaluation of the program.

Procedures

After developing a sample pool from those willing to take part in the study, the interviewer invited those selected to participate. The interviewer set up a convenient time for both parties to engage in the interview. A five-dollar Starbucks gift card was offered to those individuals as an appreciation gift for their participation in the study. The interviews took place at a location of the interviewee’s choosing.

The interviews occurred at an approximate rate of two a week for ten weeks. Interviews took place from
January of 2011 until March of 2011. The interview guide contains approximately ten questions and each interview took no longer then thirty minutes. Once the interview was completed, the participants were given a debriefing statement and thanked for their time.

Protection of Human Subjects

Every effort was made to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants. An informed consent form was given to each participant. The consent form informed them who is running the study, what the study is trying to accomplish and who they should contact if they have any questions about the study. No names or identifying information would be disclosed. A random number from one to seven was assigned to every interview and the notes associated with that interview. Furthermore, the information gathered during the interviews was stored in such a way that no persons other then the interviewer had access to it, ensuring the protection of all those participating.

Data Analysis

This study utilized qualitative data analysis procedures. Initially, data collected via the audio-taped
or hand-written interview was transcribed verbatim and coded. Once the information was transcribed, themes and ideas were identified in order to further explore these ideas for the study.

Summary

This chapter presented the qualitative methodology applied in this study. The sampling, data collection, instrument, and procedures in conducting this study were discussed. Confidentiality and protection of human subjects was covered as well. This chapter concluded with a brief description of the data analysis techniques that were used for this study.
CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine the perceptions on the effectiveness for a parent mentor program known as Parents in Partnership (PIP) and to identify the program’s strengths and weaknesses. Qualitative data was collected via in person interviews with both the parent mentors and the biological parent mentees to analyze the participants’ perceptions. The responses of the parents involved in this program is discussed in this chapter.

Presentation of the Findings

A total of 14 parents were interviewed for this study. Seven parent mentors or PIP’s and seven biological parent mentees. Of the seven PIP’s, six (86%) are female and one (14%) is male. The ethnicities represented are three (43%) Hispanic/Latino, three (43%) African Americans/Black and one (14%) Caucasian/White. All are over the age of 23.

Seven parent mentees consist of all female participants. The ethnicities represented are three (43%)
Caucasian/white, three (43%) Hispanic/Latin and one (14%) African American/Black. Two (29%) of the biological parent mentees did not finish high school. Five (71%) of the biological parent mentees completed high school with that being the highest level of education. The ages of the parent mentees ranged from 22 to 47 years old. All parent mentees have an open child welfare case with DCFS.

The questions asked in the face-to-face interviews are used to gather information about how those involved in the “Parents in Partnership” (PIP) program feel about its effectiveness as well as its deficiencies. The responses are then summarized to identify themes that pertained to the efficacy of the PIP program in Los Angeles County.

The following themes are identified according to the responses given by the participants. The parent mentors responses are discussed first. Seven \( n = 7 \) current parent mentors were asked to respond to 9 questions regarding their thoughts about the PIP program. The first question asked was, “What components of the PIP program do you feel are working effectively?” Two major themes emerged as components participants feel are effective.

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The first theme identified was parent partner and biological parent connection through a shared experience. Four (n = 4) of the respondents feel this is the major component of the program that is working most effectively. Participant six stated, “When we tell our stories and really reach out to them and let them know that we’ve actually been where they are really allows them to open up and really ask questions” (Participant six, Personal Communication, February 2011).

The second theme centers around the curriculum and the information provided during the orientation. Three (n = 3) of the participants feel the curriculum of the orientation is the most effective component of the program. Participant three replied to this question by saying, “I think the curriculum that we have is really good. It’s enough to answer a lot of questions but not so much that it bores the parents” (Participant three, Personal Communication, February 2011).

The next question asked of the parent mentors was, “What components of PIP program do you feel are not working effectively”? Four themes were indicated as non-effective components of the PIP program. Four participants (n = 4) feel communication and team work
among the different offices is significantly lacking. Two (n = 2) believe everything is working fine. One (n = 1) believes that additional support services such as support groups would be beneficial. Participant seven responded by saying, “Well how we get information to and from one another. I just think we don’t really work as a team” (Participant seven, Personal Communication, March 2011).

Question three was stated as follows, “What do you think we could add to the program to make it more effective”? Two distinct themes were discerned from respondents’ answers. The first is the need for more support from DCFS social workers. This is emphasized by two (n = 2) respondents. The second theme pertains to the mentoring services for biological parents. Five (n = 5) of the participants stress this particular point. Participant two replied with, “Allow us to be just a mentor to the parents. You know some parents want us to go to court with them for support. Allow us to do things like that” (Participant two, Personal Communication, February 2011).

The fourth question asked was, “Do you feel that the language used with the parents in the orientation is understandable”? All seven (n = 7) of the participants
feel that the language used is understandable to the biological parents that attend the orientation. Participant one stated, “The language we use it’s like what they speak, on a day to day basis. For example the social workers say reunify, I say to get your kids back. They understand that” (Participant one, Personal Communication, January 2011).

The fifth question asked was, “What population do you feel would best be served by this program”? All seven (n = 7) participants agree that this program can help all populations. Participant three says, “PIP can work for any parent basically. It can be any parent that is in the right mind to get their children back” (Participant three, Personal Communication, February 2011).

Question six was, “How well do you feel PIP is achieving its goals and mission statement”? All seven participants are in agreement that the goals and mission statement of the program are being achieved. Participant six said, “I think we’re doing a really good job. We’re growing a lot and people are becoming aware of us” (Participant six, personal communication, February 2011).

The next question was as follows, “Has working with PIP been a good experience for you? Why or why not”? The
participants deem working with the PIP program has been a good experience. Participant one gave this response, “it’s been an awesome experience for me. It’s been life-changing. When someone with very little education like me is now working with the department, partnering with social workers it’s a blessing” (Participant one, personal communication, January 2011).

Question eight was, “If PIP would have been in existence when you had an open case do you think you would have taken advantage of the services”? This question yielded three different themes. Five (n = 5) participants think they would have used PIP services if they would have been available to them, one (n = 1) said they did use the service when their case was open and the last participant (n = 1) believes they would not have used the service if available at the time of their open case. Participant four said, “Yeah I would have used PIP services. I really could have used the help when my case was open” (Participant four, Personal Communication, February 2011). Conversely, Participant one states, “I probably wouldn’t have used PIP when my case was open. I was really closed minded and caught up in my addiction” (Participant one, Personal Communication, January 2011).
Lastly, question nine asked, “Is there anything else you would like management to know about PIP”? Three themes were discovered. Five \((n = 5)\) feel that management should know that they are team players and PIP is here to help. One \((n = 1)\) feels management should be aware of the problems that some mentors are having with each other and another \((n = 1)\) could not think of anything. Participant six states, “we’re for the best interests of the child and also the best interest of the parents cause in order to have a healthy child you need to have healthy parents” (Participant six, Personal Communication, February 2011).

The responses of the PIP mentors indicate an overwhelmingly positive perception of the effectiveness of the PIP program. Several of the questions are answered positively by all of the PIP mentors.

The biological parent mentees were asked questions to see if the information given to them by the parent mentors is clear, if their understanding of the DCFS system has improved, and whether or not they feel this program is helpful to them in their efforts to reunify with their children. The seven \((n = 7)\) biological parent mentees questions are framed to see if they are learning what the PIP parent mentors are trying to convey.
The first question asked of the biological mentee parent was, "What was your understanding of the PIP program before you came into the orientation"? Four themes were revealed by the responses to this question. Two (n = 2) of the participants thought the PIP program was just a support group, while another two (n = 2) did not know anything about PIP before going to the orientation. Two (n=2) others believed the mentors were just consultants that helped people get their children out of foster care. Only one (n=1) mentee knew what PIP was due to being referred to the program by a friend. Participant five responded as follows," well I had a friend that came with me and she had gone to the orientation before so she explained to me that it was a place to get information and to get your questions answered" (Participant five, Personal Communication, March 2011).

The second question asked to the mentees inquired, "What did you know about the structure of DCFS before going to the PIP orientation?" All (n = 7) of the mentee parents reported that they knew little to nothing about the structure of DCFS before going to the orientation. Participant one explains, "I didn’t know anything about
DCFS because I never got any answers from DCFS. They gave me shady answers you know" (Participant one, Personal Communication, March 2011).

Question three was stated as follows, "How has coming to the orientation changed your understanding of the DCFS system"? This question generated three main themes. A better understanding of the complexity of the system was the response of one (n = 1) of the participants. Two participants (n = 2) indicated becoming more familiar with court and chain of command procedures after the orientation. Four (n = 4) of the participants said the orientation was instrumental in teaching them how to advocate on their own behalf. Participant two stated, "I know that there are steps to take if you’re not happy with your social worker. Now I can understand a little better why they do some of the things they do” (Participant two, Personal Communication, March 2011).

The fourth question asked was, "What are your thoughts about how clear the information provided at the orientation was? Was it understandable"? All participants (n = 7) feel that the information provided is clear and understandable. Participant four explained, "The information was good. I like how they have one of the
social workers there and one the PIP’s so they use words that everybody can understand” (Participant four, Personal Communication, March 2011).

Question number five inquired, “Can you tell me what you understood about concurrent planning”? All seven (n = 7) participants accurately described concurrent planning as two simultaneous permanent placement plans. All portrayed a clear understanding of the concept. Participant seven describes it as, “social workers have to have a plan for your children to one go home with the family or two go somewhere that is more permanent than foster care like adoption or guardianship” (Participant seven, Personal Communication, March 2011)

The next question asked, “After going to the parent orientation how has your understanding of abuse and neglect changed”? Two themes were exposed from the responses of the participants. A better understanding of the laws about abuse and neglect (n = 6) and the need for more information on neglect (n=1) were themes. Participant one stated, “I think they need to be more specific about neglect. Because for myself, the neglect charges they have to check that stuff out more and when
explained to the parents some parents don't understand" (Participant one, Personal Communication, March 2011).

Question seven asked, "How well do you understand your rights as a parent after going to the orientation?" All mentee parents (n = 7) report being significantly more informed about their rights as a parent after their orientation. Participant five said, "I understand my rights a lot better since going to the orientation. I don't just take what the social worker says as fact. I can look it up myself and I know that I have rights as a parent" (Participant five, Personal Communication, March 2011).

Next question eight asked, "Has your optimism about your case increased or decreased after going to the orientation"? Again all participants feel that their optimism has improved since getting involved with the PIP's. Participant three responded with, "I feel real good about my case now. At first I thought I would never get my kids back and had nowhere to turn and now I know that it's a process that I'm learning" (Participant three, Personal Communication, March 2011).

The next question asked, "Do you feel that the PIP program could better serve parents in the community? If
so how”? Two themes emerged from this question. Five (n = 5) participants feel that the PIP program needs to be more available and visible in the community and two (n = 2) believe the program is doing well.

The last question asked was, “Would you refer this program to someone else”? Two themes were gleaned. Two (n = 2) of the parents stated that they had already referred someone and five (n = 5) stated that they would be willing to refer another parent in the system to the PIP program. Participant five replied, “Yeah I would. I think it’s a great program and I think that it really is trying to work on helping parents get their kids back” (Participant five, Personal Communication, March 2011).

Responses from the parent mentees are as positive in regard to their perceptions on the effectiveness of the PIP program as that of the mentors. All feel the program is useful in helping biological parents gain information and support on how to navigate the DCFS system.

Summary

This chapter covered the responses of participants’ in the “Parents in Partnership” program. The responses were obtained from 59 pages of transcripts, which were
derived from approximately seven hours of face-to-face interviews. Both parent mentors and biological parent mentees expressed their thoughts about how effective the PIP program is. Both groups of parent gave positive responses about the effectiveness of the program.
CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Introduction

This chapter discusses the findings of the qualitative study on participants' perceptions on the effectiveness of the "Parents in Partnership" program (PIP) of the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services. The results of the study as well as the limitations that affected data collection are examined in this chapter. This chapter concludes with recommendations for social work practice and future research suggestions.

Discussion

The interview questions were designed to better understand how the participants in the PIP program of Los Angeles perceived its effectiveness. The findings from this research study indicate that the participants' in PIP, both mentor and mentee, believe the program is effective. The parent mentors and biological parent mentees deem the PIP program was helpful to them and would benefit anybody facing similar circumstances.
Parent partners judge the PIP program can help any parent with an open DCFS case and that the goals and mission statement of the program are being met. The mentors also mentioned the importance of the orientation process for the mentees. Orientations give the mentees an introduction to the program and set expectations as mentees navigate the process. Overall, responses from the PIP parents were positive in regard to effectiveness. The parent mentors' answers promote continued expansion of the program.

The biological parent mentees' responses are also encouraging in respect to the effectiveness of the program. The mentee parents all reported that the information provided at the orientation is clear and helpful in establishing an understanding of the program. The PIP program improved the mentees optimism about the outcome of their DCFS case and their understanding of DCFS procedures and policies such as concurrent planning.

In reviewing the information provided by the participants', three overarching themes were seen as important factors of the PIP program: (1) the information provided to the mentees in the program, (2) the shared
experiences between the mentors and mentees and (3) ideas suggested by interviewees for improvement of the program.

Both participant groups identify the information provided at the orientation as a unique and invaluable asset to the parents. The parent mentors felt that the information provided at the orientation and at the support groups is very important. They lamented the fact that they did not have access to such information when their cases were opened. One of the parent mentors further explained this point by stating, "the information that we give to the parents is meant to help them get through the DCFS system as quickly and with the less amount of stress possible" (participant six, personal communication, February 2011).

The mentees saw the information as accessible and felt they could trust that the accuracy of the information because those that delivered the information were similar to them. Furthermore, one participant said, "I never got any information from my social worker. The [mentors] answered all my questions, and I felt like they were telling me the truth and not giving me the runaround like my social worker" (Participant two, Personal Communication, March 2011).
The participants see the information as helpful and necessary. According to the participants, the PIP program allows parents to obtain needed facts about DCFS. The participants praise this aspect of the program as the information is crucial to their ability to reunify with their children. Parent engagement programs such as PIP, have the potential to change the way business is done at DCFS. PIP and other parent engagement programs that help biological parents obtain facts about how to get their children back can play a significant role in improving outcomes for children and families. This program could lead to children being in the system for shorter lengths of time, and is likely to reduce recidivism once the family is reunified.

A second theme that was expressed by the participants in the study is the feeling of shared experiences. The parent mentors view themselves as role models for the biological parents. One mentor explained it as, "we are people they can look at and say see if they can do it, then I can do it too. We have been where they are and felt just like them" (Participant three, Personal Communication, February 2011). The parent
mentors are able to empathize with the biological parents due to similar experiences in dealing with DCFS.

The biological parents also expressed the importance of having someone support them who truly understand how they feel. One of the biological parent mentees explained, "None of the social workers really know how it feels to have someone come into your home and tell you you’re a bad parent. It really hurts" (Participant four, personal communication, March 2011).

The shared experience aspect of the PIP program seems to be the most impactful component of the program. The parent mentors spoke of an increased sense of purpose to their lives. The program helped them develop a larger social support system that aids them in maintaining a positive path in life. Many of the parent mentors expressed gratitude for the enrichment the PIP program brings to their life.

Many of the biological parent mentees believe the mentors could relate on a much deeper level to their situations than any of the other DCFS staff. The parent mentees expressed an appreciation for having someone to look to for guidance that had been “in their shoes”. The
parent mentees also described an overall increase in confidence, optimism, and a desire to be better parents.

According to the participants in this study, the PIP program has improved several areas of their lives such as increase social support and personal insight. Based on the responses, the PIP program is doing much more than providing support for parents while they are trying to get their children back. Mentees have also indicated an overall enrichment to their personal and social lives as a result of the program. This suggests that parents who are involved with the PIP program may improve their focus, confidence, as well as their ability to advocate for themselves.

The final major theme identified in this study is the suggestions made to improve the PIP program. Both sets of parents feel that PIP program is positive but have ideas on how to improve the program to allow more families access to the program. The parent mentors suggested that during business hours, the hot line should have a live person answering the phones as opposed to having parents leaving messages. Parents would be more likely to us this service if someone who is attentive and is answering their questions picked up the phone.
A suggestion made by both groups of parents is to increase the number of DCFS offices that have the PIP program available to parents. All the parents feel that every office should have a mentor available for biological parents. Another suggestion recommended by the parents is to have more support groups and to have them at every office. The parents realize a glaring need in the community for more support services for parents with children in the child welfare system.

The ideas for improving the PIP program may also lead to improvements that can help the child welfare system as a whole. The child welfare system is now shifting and is recognizing the importance of parent engagement in the improvement of outcomes for children within the system (Berrick at el., 2011). Clients might be the key to understanding what does and does not work in DCFS. They can also be helpful in identifying and implementing possible solutions. If the PIP program is used as an indicator, parents can be very helpful in improving delivery of services. With increases in parent engagement services such as PIP, social work professionals may see improvements in reunification rate, lower recidivism numbers, and behavioral issues in
children. An overall improvement in the way the child welfare system works is possible.

Generally speaking, the interviews revealed overwhelmingly positive perceptions of the PIP program by mentors and mentees. Both the mentors and the mentees feel the program should be expanded and is a constructive program for DCFS to continue. The biological parents seem to trust the mentors more than they do the child welfare professionals due to their shared experiences between mentor and mentee.

Limitations

This study has notable limitations. One such limitation is the general lack of male participants within the composition of the sample groups. The sample size was predominantly female due to the lack of fathers that participate in the PIP program. A larger number of male participants were not available at the time the study was conducted. The small sample size of this study limits its generalizability. This study also utilized non-probability sampling, namely convenience sampling. This resulted in an unknown degree of sampling error.
Recommendations for Social Work Practice, Policy, and Research

The field of child welfare continues to have a reputation of devaluing the role of birth parents. The PIP program and programs like it can offer the child welfare system another way to engage biological parents in the hope of reunifying families more frequently and in less time. The results of this study indicate that PIP and parent engagement programs like it, may play a unique role in the child welfare system. Many of the parent mentees mentioned that they appreciated having someone involved with their case that “had been there” before. Due to their feelings of support and commonality with the mentors, mentees may be more likely to listen to the information they need to get their kids back. These types of programs offer a unique, culturally sensitive opportunity for child welfare agencies to connect to the community.

Conclusions

This study suggests that parent engagement programs such as the PIP program are beneficial to both the parent mentor and the biological parent mentee. This program gives the mentee a sense of hope, while allowing the
parent mentor to gain a sense of purpose and service to the community. The results of this study are consistent with findings from previous literature written by Berrick, et al., on the benefits of parent engagement mentoring programs (2011). Future studies are needed to evaluate whether or not outcomes and reunification rates are improved by such programs. Quantitative research on whether parents that engage in the PIP program reunify with their children at a higher rate would also be helpful.
APPENDIX A

QUESTIONNAIRE
Interview Guide (PIP's)

1. What components of the training do you feel are working effectively?
2. What Components of PIP do you think are not effective?
3. What could we add to make the program more effective?
4. Do you feel the language used with parents is understandable?
5. What population do you think would best be served by this program?
6. How well do you feel PIP is achieving its goals and mission statement?
7. Has working with PIP been a good experience for you? Why or why not?
8. Do you feel that you would have used the PIP services if it was in existence when your case was opened? Why or why not?
9. Is there anything that you want the management team to know about PIP?
Interview Guide (Bio Parents)

1. How old are you?
2. What is your gender?
3. What is your identified ethnicity?
4. What is your highest level of education?
5. What was your understanding of the PIP program before you came into the orientation?
6. What did you know about the structure of DCFS before you came to the orientation?
7. How has coming to the orientation changed your understanding of the DCFS system?
8. What are your thoughts about how clear the information provided at the orientation was?
9. Can you tell me what you understood about concurrent planning?
10. After going to the parents orientation, how has your understanding of abuse and neglect changed?
11. How well do you understand your rights as a parent after the orientation?
12. Has going to the orientation helped you understand who to contact if you have questions about your case? If so how?
13. Has your optimism about your case increased or decreased after going to the parent orientation?
14. Do you think the PIP program could better serve parents in the community? If so, how?
15. Would you refer someone else to this program?
APPENDIX B

INFORMED CONSENT
Informed Consent

You are invited to add your opinions to a study on the effectiveness of the Parents in Partnership Program being run in L.A. County. The study is being conducted by Shaniece Moffett, a graduate social work student from California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB) under the supervision of Associate Professor Tom Davis at CSUSB. The study has been approved by the School of Social Work Sub-Committee of the CSUSB Institutional Review Board.

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to explore participants' feelings of effectiveness of the Parents in Partnership Program (PIP) in an effort to improve and expand the program.

Description: If you take part in this study, you will be asked a series of questions on elements of the PIP program and your understanding of that program.

Participation: Participation is totally voluntary, and you are free to skip any questions you do not wish to answer at any time.

Confidentiality: The information you give will remain confidential. No record will be made or kept of your name or any identifying information. A random number will be assigned to every interview. The information will only be viewed by the researcher. The results will be conveyed to the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) in group form only.

Duration: Partaking in the interview should take no longer than thirty minutes.

Risks: There are no foreseeable risks to taking part in this study.

Benefits: A five dollar gift card will be given to you if you choose to participate in the study. In addition the information you provide will help DCFS to improve the PIP program in an effort to reunify families in a timely manner.

Contact: If you have any questions or concerns about this study you can contact Dr. Tom Davis at (909) 537-3839.

Results: the results of the study will be available at the CSUSB library after the December of 2011.

By marking below, you agree that you have been fully informed about his study and are volunteering to take part.

Place a check mark here_____   Date_______________
APPENDIX C

DEBRIEFING STATEMENT
Debriefing Statement

The study you have just participated in was about participants' perceptions of effectiveness that participants in the parents in partnership program have. The researcher was particularly interested in what elements of the program the parents felt was working and which parts needed some further development. The researcher was also interested in finding out what parents thought needed to be added to the program to expand it to as many individuals as possible. It is hoped that the information obtained by this study will help the Department of Children Services improve and expanded this program in an effort to reunify families in a timely manner.

Thank you for participating in this study. If you feel uncomfortable or distressed as a result of participating in the study, you are advised to contact Mr. Derrick Perez-Johnson, Derrick, Children’s Service Administrator for the Department of Children and Family Services Lakewood office, at perezdb@dcfs.lacounty.gov. If you have any questions about the study, please feel free to contact Dr. Tom Davis PhD at (909) 537-3839. If you would like to obtain a copy of the findings of the study, please contact Professor Tom Davis at (909) 537-3839 after September 1, 2011 in the Pfau Library.
REFERENCES


