A strength-based perspective on group homes

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A STRENGTH-BASED PERSPECTIVE ON GROUP HOMES

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
Liza Ana Fimbres
Rose Kathleen Solomon
June 2008
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ABSTRACT

The number of children in out-of-home care is significant enough to warrant more attention. This study utilized interviews, focus groups and questionnaires to examine the perspectives of former foster youth, group home unit social workers and members of the Group Home Screening Committee from Riverside County Children's Services Division regarding the strengths of group home care. This study identified seven meta-themes that are viewed as strengths of group homes among the three data sets. Those strengths include: providing educational support for the children, addressing the mental health needs of the children in a therapeutic and diverse manner, individualizing the approaches and treatments to the child, having caring, nurturing, and educated staff that make the effort to build a rapport with the children, providing a structure conducive to minimizing the behavioral problems of the child, adequately and successfully preparing the clients for emancipation, and providing the children with recreational activities that children in family settings might participate in.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Lastly, to the CSUSB MSW class of 2008 a.k.a. change agents, for making this journey unforgettable.

Thanks for the support 😊
DEDICATION

To my mommy,
whose strength and dedication has been my motivation,
and to All of God’s Children,
whose remarkable lives have been my inspiration for
pursuing a career in social work.

--L.F.

To Nancy Jane Mathews,
who has the biggest heart of anyone I know,
and to all the courageous foster children I’ve had the
opportunity to get to know
and have touched my heart in so many ways.

--R.S.
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Problem Statement

The number of children in out-of-home care as a result of the child welfare system is significant enough to warrant more attention and research into the types of out-of-home care into which these children are placed. The Child Welfare League of America (2006) reported that in 2004, there were an estimated 302,614 children in out-of-home care in the United States, of which 45,317 children were from California (2006). California has the highest number of children in out-of-home care in the United States. Schwartz (1991) suggests that “the rates of out-of-home placement are increasing at alarming rates” (p. 189).

One of the many options for out-of-home care used in child welfare is group homes. Related key words used to describe group homes also include residential group care, residential treatment, out-of-home care, and residential placements among others. “A group home setting is a therapeutic home environment designed to meet the
socio-emotional needs of adolescents not able to live at home” (Baez, 2003, p. 351).

Baez describes common characteristics of group homes as providing individualized casework as well as therapy. They also provide treatment goals for the child to work on throughout their stay at the group home. Group homes are typically structured as a non-family setting, yet still offer a place to live where a child can receive services in their home. Because of the lack of a family setting, “residential care has been regarded as a treatment of last resort since the advent of the ‘least restrictive environment’ treatment principle in the 1970’s” (Frensch & Cameron, 2002, p. 308). The use of foster homes or family reunification and maintenance are often encouraged as a primary option for children in the system (Hinckley & Ellis, 1985). However, children in group homes often have a wide range of needs that might not always be addressed in the child’s family of origin or a foster home.

Included in the range of issues children in out-of-home care experience are poverty, separation and removal from family, inadequate parenting, child abuse, neglect, poor social functioning, family substance abuse,
violence, frequent out-of-home placements and sexual abuse (Baez, 2003; Frensch & Cameron, 2002). The difficulties faced by these children manifest themselves in a wide variety of mental health issues such as "chaotic behavior, poor impulse control, proneness to harm others, destruction of property, and physical threats" (Frensch & Cameron, 2002, p. 311). These children may be characterized as emotionally disturbed with connections to other diagnoses such as attention deficit disorder, conduct disorder, depression, anxiety, personality disorders and impulse control disorder (Baez, 2003; Lyons & Schaefer, 2000). Baez (2003) identifies that the children in child welfare populations have a greater need for mental health services than that of a normal population.

Children that engage in negative external behavior such as acting out are further troubled by an alarmingly high rate of instability of residential placements (Farmer, Wagner, Burns, & Richards, 2003). In addition to inconsistent placement, children with the problems discussed tend to stay in care for longer periods of time overall and are less likely to be adopted or reunified with parents because of the difficulty of their
behavioral problems for parents or caregivers (Kupsinel & Dubsky, 1999).

History

Residential care has been a part of the United State’s approach to child welfare throughout its history. In the 1800s, children resided with their parents in almshouses. By 1875, there were critics of this system and separate institutions were set up for children. Orphanages became popular in the early 1900s with about 125,000 children residing in them in the United States. The institutions were set up and funded primarily by charitable or religious organizations and were concerned with instilling “good moral character” and obedience as well as housing and feeding the children (Crosson-Tower, 2001, p. 390).

Starting in the mid 1900s, there were major criticisms of the effects of institutional care on the development of young children. Bowlby’s research demonstrated the negative effect on children in Maternal Care and Mental Health in 1951 as did Goffman in 1961 in his book, Asylums. Goffman presented the case that children become “institutionalized” and are therefore
less able to function once they leave the institutional setting (Crosson-Tower, 2001).

The current philosophy in child welfare is that children need to be in the "least restrictive" environment possible. Family preservation is emphasized whenever achievable as opposed to placement in out-of-home care (Crosson-Tower, 2001). Despite the move from institutional care, group home settings still provide care for a large number of children in the United States. In 1998, the Child Welfare League of America administered a study to determine the total capacity of private and public residential group care facilities. The survey reported that at the time there were approximately 10,000 residential facilities nationwide, ranging from four-bed group homes to 250-plus bed institutions. In these facilities, approximately 200,000 children and youth from infants to 21 years of age are being served (CWLA, 2007).

Purpose of the Study

Despite reluctance to place children in residential programs, the system currently does not offer many alternatives for children that need a high level of care.
Research has shown that children residing in family-style residential programs have shown improvement while in placement. However, there is less evidence that these changes are maintained after placement. In the 1980’s, two major studies were conducted that examined post-placement outcomes and both showed that over time positive changes diminished drastically (Friman, 1996).

Therefore, it is crucial to understand the elements of residential group care that can provide children with both short-term and long-term positive changes. Contact with nurturing, authoritative adults has been shown to improve the outcomes of children in residential settings. Other factors that have been shown to improve the effectiveness of group care are family style arrangements, low youth-to-staff ratios, psychologically informed treatment planning, ongoing evaluation, and formalized aftercare plans (Friman, 1996).

It is important for child welfare agencies to look into the use of group homes for certain populations of children that may not receive effective care in foster homes. Barber and Delfabbro (2002) propose that “conventional family based foster care is unsuitable for most disruptive children who require out-of-home care”
Additionally, Kupsinel and Dubsky (1999) identify the need for “child welfare agencies and mental health care agencies to provide a coordinated effort to care for children who have behavioral impairments and also require out-of-home care” (p. 300).

Group homes should be perceived as a positive option for certain populations of children, specifically, behaviorally and emotionally impaired children, that otherwise may receive ineffective, incomplete, or no individualized treatment in a foster home, or family setting. “The needs of behaviorally impaired children in out-of-home care are complicated and the experiences of these children differ from those of children who do not have behavioral/ emotional issues” (Kupsinel & Dubsky, 1999, p. 301). Treatment options in a group home setting, by trained child care staff and mental health providers, can provide a comprehensive approach to reducing behavioral problems.

To understand the elements that contribute to effective group homes, three groups of people will be interviewed using a set of questions designed to understand the strengths of group homes. The participants will be solicited from Riverside County and will consist
of members of the Group Home Screening Committee, Group Home Unit social workers, and adult former group home clients. It is the aim of this study to question diverse people that have numerous interactions with group homes from several viewpoints. The qualitative method of interviewing through open-ended questions will be used to encourage extended dialogue that otherwise would not be gained by asking short-answer questions to the adult former group home clients. In addition, a focus group will be conducted to facilitate discussion with the Group Home Screening Committee. Questionnaires with open ended questions will be sent to the Group Home Unit social workers to fill out.

Significance of the Project for Social Work

The recent trend in social services has been towards a system of accountability. The Child Welfare System Improvement and Accountability Act (AB 636) was passed in 2001, with the intent to improve child welfare services. It was based on criticism that prior to the act, the accountability systems were overly focused on process and not on outcomes. The new system establishes standards and redefines how counties will be accountable for children’s
safety, health, and well-being. The outcome measures specified by the bill that directly apply to group home care are as follows: children are protected from abuse and neglect, children have permanence and stability in their living situation, children receive appropriate services to meet their educational needs, children receive adequate services to meet their physical and mental health needs, and youth emancipating from foster care are prepared to transition to adulthood (Needell & Patterson, 2004). Obtaining these outcomes is crucial for counties because it determines the level of funding that will be received.

With such a large emphasis put on producing outcomes, social work agencies should rely on outcome research when it comes to placing children. Effectiveness should be demonstrated in the services provided to children in care. It is not acceptable to simply provide for the physical needs of the children in care. Instead outcome measures will help to determine if all of the children’s needs are being met. Understanding what it is that makes residential group care effective will increase the production of positive outcomes.
This impacts the jobs of social workers who place children as well as group home administrators and staff. Placing children in facilities that better meet their needs will increase the likelihood that the child will remain in the placement. This will decrease the number of placements a child has, increasing stability. The ultimate goal is to positively impact the clients of the child welfare system by meeting their physical, social and emotional needs while in residential care (Rayment, 2005).

The generalist intervention process includes several stages that are designed to view problems from a broad overview so as to plan solutions at various levels including engagement, assessment, planning, implementation, evaluation, termination and follow-up (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2004). This study intends to evaluate the current group home system in Riverside County. The focus of evaluating as proposed by Hepworth, Rooney, Dewberry Rooney, Strom-Gottfried and Larsen (2006) is on outcomes, process and satisfaction. These three dimensions are incorporated into the research methods to understand the effectiveness of current group homes as perceived by the various target participants.
"The power of evaluation is strengthened when multiple sources of information are used" (Hepworth, Rooney, Dewberry Rooney, Strom-Gottfried, & Larsen, 2006, p. 571). Since the current trend of child welfare is based on producing outcomes, using the evaluation phase of the generalist practice is useful in identifying positive outcomes, processes and increased satisfaction in the group home system currently in place.

In addition to producing positive outcomes, cost is also a reason why this issue is important. Residential programs do require a large amount of financial resources; however, a successful residential group care program is more cost effective over time than a nonresidential program that fails. A program that has positive outcomes can prevent future interventions or institutionalization of adults who were raised in the foster care system, saving money in the long-term (Becker, 1991).

It is crucial to understand the diverse needs of children with behavioral problems in the child welfare system to provide more specialized placement options that may include group home treatment. Identifying such problematic children early on may reduce the continuous
risk of placement disruptions due to a lack of appropriate care (Barber & Delfabbro, 2002). Thus, it is necessary to recognize appropriate and effective care options for a wide range of children is necessary. By studying what individual factors contribute to effectively meeting the needs of children through residential group care, one can explore further the strengths of using group homes as a placement option.

The proposed study of the factors that contribute to meeting the needs of children through group homes is a topic that should be of interest to child welfare agencies that have group homes in use, so as to better serve a disadvantaged population of children with increased mental health needs and concerns. Specifically, the county child welfare system in question for research implementation is Riverside County. According to a master’s thesis search at the California State University, San Bernardino library website, several thesis’ related to group home children have been conducted. Most specific to Riverside County, the barriers to services for foster youth in the county’s group homes has been researched. Literature is limited in the scope of specific group home children, as definitions
of group home care varies dramatically by each home, county, state, etc. (Frensch & Cameron, 2002).

It is the hypothesis of this study that there are effective group homes in Riverside County that can contribute to meeting the needs of certain children when those positive aspects are identified that will benefit the child welfare system overall. Those aspects can be identified by posing this study’s research question: “What are the characteristics that increase the effectiveness of group homes as perceived by Group Home Screening Committee members, social workers and former group home clients?”
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

There have been several studies that identify positive aspects of group homes, which are related to the aim of this study. Positive aspects of group homes are seen as strengths and are divided into the following categories: therapeutic aspects, staff interaction, academic and social skills, addressing behavioral issues, child safety, child satisfaction, and preparing for emancipation. The main theory used in shaping this study is the strengths-based perspective. In addition to a strengths-based perspective, other theories used in formulating this study include attachment theory and the ecological perspective.

Strengths

Therapeutic Aspects

Rayment (2005) suggests that residential staff can use the natural living and learning environment to create therapeutic experiences for residents. The article shows how the relationship of the worker and client can be therapeutic. The “other 23 hours” is an argument that
workers have the potential to deliver quality therapy to children in residential care, in the time that they are not in formalized therapy, which can lead to positive outcomes (Rayment, 2005, p. 31). Staffs in group homes have the ability to create and sustain a positive and stable environment by understanding the client's behaviors and providing structure (Pazartz, 2003).

Hinckley and Ellis (1985) share that "the most effective time for an intervention is at a crisis point" (p. 209). Successful crisis management and interventions can be offered in a residential treatment setting. "Residential treatment provides the greatest benefit to more dangerous cases...This is due to the fact that given their high level of mental health needs, dangerous children and adolescents have the greatest room for clinical improvement" (Lyons & Schaefer, 2000, p. 72).

Staff Interaction

A study by Pazaratz (2003) showed that it is the quality of staff-adolescent interactions that is the most crucial component of residential group care. This study examined how a residential treatment program could maximize its effectiveness by incorporating training and
pragmatic care practices (Pazaratz, 2003). Staff training can be integrated on a variety of levels.

Parent-child relationship has been shown to be a key component of the well-being of children. Warmth, positive affect, interpersonal trust and open communication have been identified as qualities that are related to a positive relationship. Also, research has shown that a positive relationship with other adults such as mentors, foster parents, and group home staff provide similar benefits for children. It has been shown that aspects of the adult-child relationship are directly linked with child and adolescent outcomes. For example, there is a connection between the amount of positive contact a child has with his or her caregiver and fewer behavioral problems (Mustillo, Dorsey, & Farmer, 2005).

A study by Zegers, Schuengel, van IJzendoorn, and Janssens (2006) has suggested that the therapeutic worker's own attachment can be a facilitative or impeding factor in treatment. Workers with secure attachments were shown to elicit more positive expectations from adolescents in their care and were relied on more by the adolescents in times of need and distress. The quality of the relationship is an important determinate of treatment
outcomes. The study also found that as the length of time in treatment increased, the personal attachment backgrounds of the client and treatment staff increased in importance. A positive relationship between the clients and treatment staff can provide a "holding environment" for the adolescent or child to learn new ways of dealing with challenges originating from the intrapsychic and outside worlds (Zegers et al., 2006, p. 335).

Parenting skills can be applied to group care workers in the sense that they are taking on the role of a parent in the residential setting. Therefore, parenting approaches play into the strength of the relationship between the worker and client. A study done by Lipscombe, Moyers, and Farmer (2004), demonstrates the relationship between the behavior of fostered adolescents and the quality of parenting provided by the foster parent. The findings suggest that there are a number of specific issues that make poor outcomes more likely regarding parenting styles and behaviors of foster youth and that by identifying these early on, placements can be more stable and effective.
Another study examined the association between foster mothers' emotional investment and the foster child's representations of self and others. The child participants of the study, developed by Ackerman and Dozier (2005), were assessed for ability to cope with separations from caregivers. The study found that more accepting attitudes of their children early in the child-caregiver relationship was a predictor of the children developing more positive self-representations than children whose mother was less accepting. Also, quality of coping responses of the child was shown to be related to caregiver acceptance.

**Academic/Social Skills**

Frensch and Cameron (2002) conducted an extensive review of residential mental health placements for children and youth in which they compiled several sources, programs, study methodologies and characteristics of children and their families as well as the residential treatment outcomes of the children for the programs in which they stayed. The purpose of their review was to determine short and long-term effects of residential treatment. In regards to residential treatment in a group home setting, they specifically

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looked at a model known as the teaching family model in which a couple lives in a small group setting. The couple acts as parents that “teach social, academic, and independent living skills necessary for successful integration of residents back into the community” (Frensch & Cameron, 2002, p. 323).

According to Frensch and Cameron (2002), this model is used in over 250 group homes throughout the United States and Canada. Reviews of the studies of group homes that utilize this model suggest that residents showed an increase in academic and educational functioning as evidenced by an increase in grade point average and an increased rate of high school diploma completion. For child welfare clients that are experiencing academic problems, placement in a group home that incorporates this model can be useful in meeting the most essential needs of these children.

Addressing Behavior Issues

Barber and Delfabbro (2002) discuss the definitions of two categories of children in the system: protected and disaffected children. Protected children are generally younger and are in the system as a result of neglect or abuse, while disaffected children are older
and in care due to emotional and behavioral dysfunctions. These terms are used to describe, in detail, the scope of issues attached to the categories. For example, disaffected children tend to have more placement instability and behavioral problems in school and at home. The authors propose that disaffected children require a more intensive residential option that conventional foster care cannot offer. Age and developmental concerns should be a factor in determining effective placement options.

Joshi and Rosenberg (1997) examined children’s behavioral responses to residential treatment in an institutional setting. Thirty-six patients were observed by residential staff. The staff reported on the child’s behavior at various points during placement. “Youngsters entering into a residential treatment program initially demonstrate a significant range of deviant behavior with the exception that there will be changes in this behavior over time” (1997, p. 567). Important factors in the reliability of the study and its results centers on the observed behaviors. The observed behaviors were divided into externalized behaviors and internalized behaviors. The results of the study show that there were many
disagreements across staff participants about patient's internalized behavior, as it was more difficult to observe or detect, whereas there was more consistency in assessing the externalized behaviors. The authors discuss the need for training and supervision of staff to perform better assessments of patients so as to provide more accurate results of treatment outcomes. Also, the effectiveness of working with patients with conduct disorder and oppositional defiance disorder was low, alluding to the need of more appropriate placement options for children with those diagnoses (Joshi & Rosenberg, 1997).

Interestingly, Kupsinel and Dubsky point out that there are many barriers to permanency planning for children with behavioral problems, as they may require an alternative method of care. Their behavioral problems "are unlikely to be ameliorated sufficiently by concentration upon family status changes" (1999, p. 298). A more appropriate placement intervention is needed for this population of children. The group living environment may encourage and influence children to develop stronger peer relationships and attachments to staff that may increase treatment outcomes (Ward, 2004).
Safety

An important safety concern for group home children is suicide attempts. Baez (2003) reported “an analysis of emergency room admissions by person’s younger than nineteen for a first time suicide attempt found that previous group home placement was among the reliable predictors for future documented suicide attempts, as was being in the fifteen to nineteen year old range” (p. 352). This is an important factor to consider when determining placement options for children that have a history of suicide attempts. It also questions the need for after-suicide attempt interventions to decrease future attempts.

Child Satisfaction

The satisfaction of children in out-of-home care was looked into by Wilson and Conroy (1999), by interviewing children about their satisfaction with their current living situation in foster care and group homes. These findings are especially relevant to the proposed study on effectively meeting the needs of children through group home placement, as one hundred and fifty-eight of the study participants were residents in group homes. The research conducted was a four-year longitudinal study
examining children’s reports of their lives, level of satisfaction, and preferences through interviews about their placements (Wilson & Conroy, 1999).

In regards to overall well-being, four out of five children interviewed said they always felt safe and loved. Children reported that the quality of their life, overall had improved by moving to out-of-home care (Wilson & Conroy, 1999). Recurrent topics that the children brought up when asked about the things they enjoyed the most since they were removed from their families included: “being treated well, doing better in school, having friends, having improved self-esteem, being comfortable, having fun, having nice clothes, and having enough to eat” (Wilson & Conroy, 1999, p. 64). Although the study was limited to the children’s perceptions regarding care, the results provide encouraging insight that there are positive aspects and high satisfaction levels for children in group homes. These findings provide excellent guidance to the proposed study of meeting the needs of group home children effectively by offering a strength’s based perspective.

There are a few studies that have examined children’s perceptions of their relationships with
caregivers. Areas such as attachment to the care giving facility, emotional closeness to caregivers, and open communication were reviewed. The results from these studies varied. On one end, three-quarters of children “always” felt loved in their current homes. On the other end, one-fourth did not feel loved by anyone when they were growing up (Fox & Berrick, 2006).

Frensch and Cameron (2002) describe the effectiveness of residential treatment programs for troubled youth that fail in other programs or placements. They suggest that it can be delivered in a group home setting to improve overall functioning. The appropriateness of residential group home treatment is difficult to assess however, since there is a “lack of guidelines and diagnostic tools to make this determination” according to the authors (2002, p. 308).

However, Mustillo, Dorsey, and Farmer (2005) used an assessment tool called the Trusting Relationship Questionnaire to measure the quality of youth-professional relationship. It was developed to evaluate the relationships developed between professionals and youth with psychiatric diagnoses and extreme externalizing behavior problems in
community-based treatment programs. The tool assessed the relationship from both the child’s and adult’s perspectives and allowed for a better understanding of residential treatment. As the tool “appears to capture the quality of the relationship between service providers and youth in their care, thus bridging a gap in assessment measures” (p. 577).

Preparing for Emancipation

Emancipation is a major life event that involves transitioning from total dependence on the foster care system to self-sufficiency. Youth who emancipate from the foster care system face a particularly difficult time when they leave the system due to the process of “institutionalization” they encounter. Many areas of the youth’s lives have been shown to be impacted such as securing or obtaining education, employment, and housing. In addition, many emancipated youth may still be dealing with the effects of abuse as well as coping with feelings of loss and grief. Youth may also experience impairments in emotional and social functioning as a result of abuse or neglect both before entering and while in the system (Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2006; Reilly, 2003).
Independent living skills training can be an integral in easing some of the difficulties these youth encounter. The key elements of an independent living skills program are teaching tangible and intangible skills, healthy relationships with friends and family, ability to nurture their children, sexual responsibility, community participation, connecting with other people, and positive self-identity. Other services that may assist emancipated youth in their transition at both the state and local levels include tutoring, scholarships, transitional supervised living, housing opportunities, and advocacy organizations for former foster youth (Pecora et al., 2000; Georgiades, 2005).

Theories Guiding Conceptualization

Several theories have been reviewed in literature that are applicable to the needs of children in group home care. The focus of this study is the strengths-based perspective. Saleebey, one of the pioneers of strengths-based practice states,

The central proposition of social work practice, as I see it, is to exploit the best in all of us; to work together to surmount adversity and trouble; to
confront the appalling with all the tools available within us and around us; to wrestle distress and disillusionment to the ground with determination and grit; to grab the hands of others and march unwaveringly, even heroically, in the direction of hopes, dreams, and possibilities. (2005, p. 22)

A strengths-based perspective challenges the societal fascination with problems and pathology. Traditional approaches have focused on deficits whereas a strengths-based approach examines possibilities and opportunities for growth. Essential to this perspective is the idea that all people, families, and communities possess resources and tools within them and around them (Saleebey, 2005).

The first step in taking a strengths-based approach is identifying assets in order to build what is already in place. The people directly involved in the situation are the most valuable source of this information. It is important that professionals do not place their own expectations or limits on possibilities. Collaboration between professionals and clients is key to successful strengths-based practice. Saleebey reflects that the language used is essential in directing practice. The
author suggests that there are key words that encapsulate the principles of a strengths-based perspective: competencies, capacities, courage, promise, possibility, positive expectations, resilience, reserves, and resources (2005, p. 10).

One crucial principle of the strengths-based perspective is the concept that caring is essential to human well-being. Saleebey states, "...all those paid caregivers need to be able to give the support and quality care that is commensurate with the highest ideals of care without subverting their own well-being" (2005, p. 19). Caring for other human beings is an integral part of group homes. The main idea behind this type of placement is that children that cannot be cared for in less restrictive environments deserve to have their social, emotional, and physical needs met. This study attempts to use a strengths-based perspective by assuming that the intention behind group homes, to provide care for children, is a strength that can be developed further to increase the effectiveness of group home care.

Group home children are most often removed because of safety risks while with their family of origin. A common theory used to discuss family of origin
difficulties with the child and the mother is attachment theory. Sloutsky describes related attachment difficulties (1997). "The major cause of the detrimental effects of institutionalization is the separation of the child from their mothers or other primary caretakers...[S]uch a separation negatively affects emotional bonding between the child and the mother...and prevents the child from developing secure attachment" (Sloutsky, 1997, p. 132). Attachment issues in the developmental process of the child can cause future difficulties. Using attachment theory when understanding children that are typically cared for in group homes can offer a perspective on current relationships and behaviors with substitute care takers or workers.

Sloutsky continues to review theoretical frameworks for understanding the outcomes of treatment for children. An ecological perspective of children and their environments is described. "There is an assumption of the active interaction between developing individuals and their environments, as well as between the components of the environment, which jointly affect the process of human development" (1997, p. 133). Because children in the child welfare system typically experience disruptions
in their environments, an ecological perspective can be helpful at viewing difficulties in child development. Similar to an ecological perspective is the contextualist perspective that discusses development in various settings. "The presence or absence of an immediate setting, such as family, can be the factor that profoundly changes the context of development" (Sloutsky, 1997, p. 133). Developmental concerns can be described using such framework.

Winter offers a sociological perspective for viewing the childhood of children in the system in which a framework is outlined to monitor the needs of children in relation to quality care (2006). Winter discusses the social construction of childhood and its effect on children.

A sociological model of childhood allows for the consideration of the differing and fluid impact of cultural and social factors on the development of competence and capability, therefore [opening] the door to research concerning younger looked after children in which the complexities of their lives can be explored. (Winter, 2006, p. 61)
CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

The study is intended to gain the perspectives about group homes from the Group Home Screening Committee, Group Home Unit social workers, and former adult group home clients by utilizing qualitative methods of research with participants from Riverside County. The design is structured to incorporate focus groups, questionnaires and face-to-face interviews. The data collection procedures and instruments are further discussed in this section, as well as the methods of protecting human subjects and confidentiality. Last, data analysis procedures are described.

Study Design

The research question is: “What are the characteristics that increase the effectiveness of group homes as perceived by Group Home Screening Committee members, social workers and former group home clients?” The study intends to use a strengths-based perspective to explore the characteristics of group homes in Riverside County that increase the well-being of foster youth. The
hypothesis of the study is that there are strengths that can be built on in order to increase the effectiveness of group homes. It is the intention of the study to provide information that can be used to increase positive outcomes for residents of group homes.

A variety of perspectives will be explored including the views of former group home clients also described as former foster youth, members of a Group Home Screening Committee, and social workers from group home units in Riverside County in order to gain a well-rounded picture. This will be accomplished through a focus group, questionnaires, and face-to-face interviews. The three qualitative approaches were chosen in an effort to facilitate non-prescribed feedback and give participants the opportunity to share information based on their experiences. In addition, collecting data from three different sources can be a means of corroboration. If data from the three sources support each other, there can be more confidence in the conclusions that are reached.

A limitation of the study is that the sample of former foster youth may not be representative of the population. The researchers will be soliciting participants from the California Youth Connection; it is
assumed that former foster youth with involvement in the organization have more positive life outcomes than the general population of former foster youth. Also, the study is designed with the assumption that Group Home Unit social workers and members of the Group Home Screening Committee have knowledge of the strengths of group homes based on their interactions. However, this may vary on an individual basis which may limit or skew the responses or lead to inconsistent results.

Sampling

The methods of the proposed study include a focus group with the Riverside County Group Home Screening Committee, a written questionnaire given to social workers from group home units within Riverside County and qualitative interviews with former group home clients. The three sample groups were chosen in an effort to obtain data from individuals that have frequent interactions with group homes and group home clients. These sources would be familiar with the elements of group home programs. Group home administrators and staff were considered as possible participants. However, after further consideration, it was determined that they were
not a suitable source due to potential partiality in responses.

The Group Home Screening Committee is a unique committee set up in Riverside County that reviews cases of children that are being considered for group home placement. They were chosen as participants because of their knowledge of group homes that serve Riverside County as well as the unique needs of the clients that are served by group homes. Likewise, social workers from the group home unit have direct contact with both clients and group home personnel and have knowledge of various aspects of group homes. Former foster youth make up a critical part of the study because of their immersed experience living in a group home. This sample group was also chosen due to the fact that they are no longer clients in the foster care system and have the ability to reflect on their experiences.

Riverside County Department of Public Social Services has an agency review process. The researchers submitted the MSW Project Proposal for Riverside County on October 30, 2007 and were granted a letter of support on January 11, 2008, which was used to conduct a focus group and distribute questionnaires to Riverside County
employees. California Youth Connection has received a proposal from the researchers. Approval has been granted by the Riverside County adult supporters to solicit participants for interviews during their meetings.

Data Collection and Instruments

The data collected for this study is the perceptions of social workers, group home screening committee members, and former foster youth regarding the characteristics that increase effectiveness of group homes. The data that was collected utilized a strengths-based perspective, meaning that the questions were geared towards discovering the positive elements of group homes. It is not the intent of the study to disregard the negative aspects of group homes, rather it is hoped that by discovering strengths, information was gathered that can be useful when evaluating group homes. However, participants were given the opportunity at the end of their interview, focus group or questionnaire to share any additional information that they feel is pertinent to the study.

The independent variables measured were characteristics of group homes and needs of children
placed in group homes. All independent variables were measured by categorizing participant responses. The level of measurement is nominal as the variables have attributes that are different in kind.

Also, some demographic information was collected from the group home screening committee and social workers such as years of professional experience (ratio measurement), and educational background (interval measurement).

The dependent variable for this research question is the effectiveness of group homes as it is perceived by participants. This variable was measured at a nominal level. A numeric value is not placed on responses, rather, responses are categorized. Input was solicited from the faculty advisor who has extensive knowledge and experience with Riverside County Children’s Services Division, when designing the instruments. Additional input was gathered during the creation of the instruments from former group home unit social workers and current group home administrators.

The three forms of data collection are qualitative in nature. The focus group outline consists of questions regarding clients, program structure, therapeutic
environment, and suggestions about group homes (Appendix A). The questions were designed with the scope of knowledge of the group home committee members in mind. A benefit to including this source in the study is that the members of the committee have a variety of professional backgrounds including child welfare, education, probation and mental health which increases the diversity of knowledge and experience. A possible limitation to including this source is that because the members of the group home screening committee may have frustrations working with group homes on a daily basis, it may be difficult for them to use a strengths-based perspective during the focus group.

Social workers from group home units in Riverside County were given a questionnaire consisting of eleven questions regarding the following topics: general information, behavior modification approaches, selection process, basic needs of clients, group home staff, recreation, education, therapeutic environment, and conclusion (Appendix B). When designing questions for the questionnaire, special attention was given to minimizing the ethical risks of such a topic by focusing on the strengths. In addition, this set the tone for
constructive feedback as opposed to listing complaints regarding group homes. A limitation to asking questions of social workers from the group home unit is that they may not be fully aware of the daily operations of all group homes. To address this issue, the study attempted to capture data regarding elements of group homes that stood out to the social workers as exceptional.

In order to collect data from former foster youth, a qualitative interview was conducted. The interview consisted of nine questions intended to capture the strengths of group homes from the former foster youths’ perspective (Appendix C). A limitation of this interview is that it is possible that the participants may feel that their concerns about group homes are not being valued. In order to address this limitation, participants were informed about the purpose of the study and the reasoning for focusing on strengths. In addition, participants were given an opportunity at the end of the interview to add any additional information they would like to share.
Procedures

In order to solicit participation in the focus group, a group home screening committee meeting was attended and at that meeting information was given to potential participants regarding the study. Potential participants were contacted with specific information about when and where the focus group was to be held. The focus group was held following a group home screening committee meeting, at the same location, for the convenience of the participants. The approximate length of the focus group was thirty minutes. The focus group was facilitated by the researchers.

Prospective participants in the questionnaire for social workers in the group home unit were solicited by announcements at their office with permission from the supervisors of the units, as well as the regional manager. Social workers were given a questionnaire and return envelope in their office mail box. A follow-up visit and reminder email was sent out. The questionnaires were able to be mailed to the researchers using inter-office mail in the provided envelope.

Former foster youth were recruited to participate in interviews through the California Youth Connection, a
non-profit organization run by and for former foster youth. The researchers attended a monthly meeting to provide information about the study and recruit applicable participants. Only one applicable participant was recruited, however, members contacted potential participants to see if they would be willing to be interviewed. A snowball sample was used, in this case, to recruit six additional participants. A gift card to a fast food restaurant was offered for participation in the amount of five dollars. A requirement was that potential participants will all be former residents of a group home.

Protection of Human Subjects

All three methods included informed consents (Appendix D) and debriefing statements for the participants (Appendix E) after data collection. Participation in all three methods was voluntary and could be discontinued at anytime during the study. The confidentiality of all participants in the study was protected throughout the entire study. Focus group and interview participants' names were not recorded or associated with their responses at any time during the
study. Each participant was assigned a random identifier for the use of data recording. Following assignment of the random identifier, the names of participants were destroyed. The focus group and interviews were audio taped with the participant’s permission only, for the purpose of accuracy in data recording and analysis.

Questionnaires remained anonymous. Names were not included on the questionnaire and a limited number of identifiers were recorded. Participants were asked to seal the envelope when mailing the completed questionnaire to the researchers, without their name on it. Upon receiving the filled out questionnaire, the envelope was destroyed so that it cannot be associated with questionnaire.

Data Analysis

Because there are three different sets of participants from three distinct groups, three sets of data emerged. The main process by which the data was analyzed was through open coding. “Open coding aims at expressing data and phenomena in the form of concepts” (Flick, 2002, p. 177). By coding the participants’ responses, recurrent themes were identified and
categorized. The instruments used to collect data have been formulated to have various categories that will be used to frame the coding and categorization of data, known as constructed codes (Flick, 2002).

For example, the questions asked of the Group Home Unit social workers are shaped under the following categories: introductory questions, behavior modification, selection process, basic needs of client, group home staff, recreation, education, therapeutic environment and concluding questions. Each category was devised by use of the available literature on group homes that have identified those categories as significant. Each group interviewed has similar categories that will employ parallel data analysis methods whereby participant responses will be transcribed under their appropriate category then reviewed to find emergent concepts that are consistent among all three sets of participants.

For instance, one of the questions asked of the Group Home Unit social workers is: “In what ways have you seen group homes support the educational needs of their clients?” Possible responses may have included onsite tutoring, participation in after school programs, group home staff advocating for special needs through
individualized educational plans, etc. Similarly, the following question is asked to former group home clients: "Can you give an example of a way in which the group home supported your educational needs?" A presumed response was that at their group home, they were assigned a group home staff that would tutor them, which allowed them the opportunity to focus on school work and increase grades. By reviewing both sets of data under the educational category, it can be assumed that offering on-site tutoring is a perceived strength by both social workers and group home clients.

All participant responses went through similar analysis, where categorical responses were reviewed to find recurrent themes and differences among the three varying groups. Overall recurrent responses were interpreted as strengths of group homes that lead to their overall effectiveness.

Summary

Overall, the construction of the study was designed to gain an overview of group homes from different perspectives using three different forms of qualitative research. The intended participants were recruited from
Riverside County. Instruments used in data collection have been categorized to provide a frame for data analysis so that recurrent responses can be refined and identified as group home strengths. These strengths can then be used to suggest characteristics that improve the effectiveness of group homes.
CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

The data received from the three groups of participants were independently reviewed by the two researchers and the faculty supervisor to eliminate bias in responses. The three forms of data collection included a focus group with the group home screening committee, open-ended questionnaires with group home unit social workers and interviews with adult former foster youth. The researchers then coded the responses from the three groups to find emerging themes among the three separate groups. Themes were identified by the frequency of similar responses amongst the participants. Finally, a list of meta-themes and characteristics, that were parallel among all three groups, were gathered to support the researchers' hypothesis that there are strengths evident in group homes that can be built upon to increase the effectiveness group homes.
Presentation of the Findings

Focus Group

There were three participants from the group home screening committee in the focus group, with background's including mental health, education and child welfare. The focus group lasted thirty minutes. Information gained in the beginning of the interview can help understand reasons for why children are in group homes. When asked, what are some of the reasons children are referred to group home screenings, one participant stated the following, “Behaviors that make them not successful in foster care...running away, using drugs, aggressive, assaultive, cutting on themselves.” There were two main themes that arose from the focus group that did not come up in the other data sets: curriculum-based skill building and having a vision.

Curriculum-based skill building, as described by one of the participants includes: anger management groups, problem solving groups and social skill groups. All three participants agreed that offering curriculum-based skill building was a strength in group homes that they have interacted with in Riverside County. One participant elaborated that, “you are actually teaching them the
skills they need to be successful in the world...If there are not curriculum-based skill building components, those kids are not going to do well when they transition out.”

Another main theme that arose, that was unique to the focus group, was the group home having a vision or philosophy that staff members could articulate and understand. When asked about groups homes that they are aware of that are different from the rest, one participant shared, “if you look at the strong group homes, they have a vision and they know where they want their kids to be and all the staff can verbalize it to you.”

Questionnaires

Questionnaires were distributed to all social workers in the group home unit of Riverside County. Of the twenty questionnaires distributed, eight were returned resulting in a 40% response rate. Of the eight participants, there was an equal distribution of male and female respondents. The educational level of the participants included five Bachelor’s level workers and three Master’s level workers, two of whom were Masters of Social Work degrees. The remaining participants had degrees in the various behavioral sciences. The eight
participants had an average of 1.5 years, ranging from 7 months to 2 1/2 years, as employees with Riverside County Children’s Services Division. There were two themes that were distinguishable to the social workers, as strengths of group homes that were not identified elsewhere: the matching process and physical condition of the facility.

Five participants shared that group homes that had a matching or selection process to appropriately identify the needs of the child that can or cannot be met through the group home was viewed as a strength. One participant commented that “Some group homes will interview the child ahead of time to see if their behaviors match their treatment plan.” Similarly, four participants noted that the location of the group home, in proximity to family members, was also a good way to match children to group homes.

Five participants commented that a characteristic that stands out in effective group homes is the cleanliness of the home. One participant wrote, “Clean, aesthetically pleasing, adequately furnished...” in regards to the home.
Interviews

Seven former foster youth were interviewed, of which, four were female and three were male. The participants ranged in age from eighteen to twenty-four. All participants have had at least one placement in a group home, although the majority of them had more. The participants were interviewed individually by the researchers at a location convenient to them. There were two major themes evident in the interviews of the former foster youth that did not arise in the other data sets: social networking and personal growth.

Four participants noted that the opportunity to develop friendships and social networks were important and positive aspects of living in a group home. One participant shared that the most memorable moment of living in a group home was “having a lot of sisters to talk about our problems.” Furthermore, participants outlined experiences that were made easier with the companionship of peers in their age group and of similar life experiences. One participant expresses:

That’s where I acquired my best friends, to this day...Those are my best friends, my sisters...We really had each other, and when you are young, kids
are so mean at school. I mean, they don’t know where you come from, or how you grew up, so the most memorable moment for me, was having someone who understood me and vice versa.

Another participant talked about how they have retained the friendships they made while in the group home, while attaining social capital. “I met a lot of good kids there, even though they are in there, and in the system. Like now I have friends in different areas. Like if I need something in those areas, they can help me.”

Another common theme among the former foster youth was the ability to experience personal growth, including developing confidence, optimism and life experiences that have attributed to their life as adults. One participant articulated that concept by stating,

My group home experience was the turning point in my life...It opened my eyes to a whole lot and it made me realize that there is worse, and that my situation could be worse...I graduated from that program with a head on my shoulders I thought I never had. If I had not gone there, I probably would have ended up a teenage mother, smoking, drinking, acting out in ways that most, stereotypically, kids
do. I think that literally, that was the best thing in my life.

Similarly, another participant discussed that the experience of being in a group home and being away from the negative environment he was in, prior to placement, was a benefit. "It was the best thing that happened to me cause if I would have stayed in that city, I would have ended up like everyone else out there." When asked what group home experience positively contributed to their life as an adult, one participant recalls:

The main couple of people that I was really close to, they always told me, 'Don't let your past affect your future.' And pretty much, I grew up in a rough background so they said you don't have to turn to running to the streets or nothing. And you can go to college, just because no one else in your family went. You know, use that power to make it better for the next generation that you have coming along.

Meta-Themes

Meta-themes were gathered as emergent themes among all three data sets. It is the researchers' assumption that if there are analogous themes among all three data
sets, then those are the strengths of group homes in Riverside County, as perceived by former foster youth, group home unit social workers and the group home screening committee. The following seven meta-themes were compiled by analyzing the themes and responses of the three various participatory groups: educational support, addressing mental health, individualization, staff, structure, preparing for emancipation and recreational activities.

Educational Support

Educational support was one of the major themes identified among the three groups as a strength. All eight former foster youth participants described a way in which the group home supported their educational needs by giving the following examples: designating homework time, assistance with homework, enforcing attendance and having a school on campus. One former foster youth shared that,

There was a designated homework time. We sat there and did our homework. There was no procrastination, no slacking. They hired people in my home that were educated...experienced people with degrees who can assist with issues we were having...Designating homework time really, really helped...That’s when I.
attained the best grades of my life. I was all A’s to B’s.

Another former foster youth described the difficulties of academic achievement due to the transitioning of placements throughout their group home experience. The participant was in a group home that had a school on the living grounds that allowed him to catch up on credits to graduate.

When I first went into the group home, I was already behind in my credits...they understand that you move around a lot...and that it’s not our fault. It’s not that we are not smart, it’s that we haven’t had the opportunity to show how smart we are. And they worked around that. They do their best to try to get every kid to graduate high school.

Similar to the responses of the former foster youth, the group home unit social workers shared similar strengths of group homes supporting the educational needs of the child by enforcing attendance, communicating with teachers, setting aside time for studying, monitoring progress and encouraging academic achievement. Seven of the eight social workers mentioned the importance of
group home staff attending or initiating Individualized Education Programs (IEP’s) for their clients.

Members of the focus group briefly discussed that they view a strength of group homes as having their children be successful in school. One participant shared, “If they are going from grade to grade successfully and getting B’s and C’s, or at the high school level they have, you know they are on track for graduation.” Another member emphasized that a positive aspect is when group homes collaborate with the schools to plan for the child’s future.

Addressing Mental Health Needs

Another commonality among the various participants was addressing the mental health needs of the child through individual therapy, group therapy and accessibility of therapeutic services and staff. Former foster youth had mixed feelings regarding therapy and its effect. One participant shared displeasure with having to share their feelings with a person that they felt they could not relate to. They shared that they would have rather have had someone to talk to that was more present and available. However, another participant acknowledged that
The group counseling that they offered in their really helped. Not only is it group counseling, ‘oh we have to talk about our feelings and emotions’ but that prepped us, because a lot of the times you’re gonna have to get up and speak in front of a group, it prepared us for that.

Seven of the eight social worker participants stated that their clients benefit from being in a group home because they are provided therapy and treatment. Responses of the types of treatment included group therapy, individual therapy, anger management, psychiatric services as well as a therapeutic environment and staff. One respondent stated, “They are provided with the treatment that they need to help them deal with their issues from being abused and neglected.”

Similarly, the focus group participants all discussed that therapy was a beneficial component in group homes. One participant shared that one of the reasons that children were referred to screening prior to group home placement was mental health issues. Another participant described that a good example of a strength in group homes that they are aware of is “Therapists that are employed by the group home and are not contract
therapists, so that they are there forty hours a week and available to the kids.” In regards to the Rate Classification Level (RCL) of group homes, the focus group described the greater need to address mental health issues as the RCL level increased:

The RCL level does equate with the services and experience of staff. The higher the level, the more services that the child should be receiving...So at a RCL level 6, those kids don’t necessary get therapy. They might access it if the child needs it, but it may not be part of their program statement. When you look at an RCL level 12, those children should be getting therapy twice a week. When you look at an RCL level 8, those children should be getting weekly therapy.

**Individualization**

All three groups commented on the need for individualization, that is, to consider or treat the individual client when interacting with them, rather than as a group. Four of the seven youth participants described some form of individualization. One former foster youth commented on a staff member’s ability to individualize when trying to teach him. “...what she
started doing was, she knew I loved art and I loved writing, so she started having me do little math problems dealing with art to try to teach me. It helped a lot...” Another former foster youth discussed her view that some group home staff would get to know the clients and find the child’s individual motivations in order to work with them better.

Six of the eight social worker participants described some form of individualization in their questionnaires, whereby the staff is aware of the child, their needs and their situation. One social worker responded that they have seen group homes exceptionally address behavior by, “creating individualized incentive programs for clients, helping clients find motivation by exploring areas of interest and getting clients involved in these activities.” Another participant commented on the individual client by sharing,

there are group homes that work great for one child but not another. Every group home has its strength and negatives. You can’t mold the child to a program, you should work a program around the child’s needs. A group home should have a focus but
be somewhat flexible in areas to help the individual child.

The focus group had comparable responses and discussed the benefit of individualizing the programs of the group homes to the needs of the child, as well. One participant said, “You can’t have one set program and expect the kids to fit into that program. Each kid comes with different issues and needs that need to be addressed. So, tailoring it to the child.” Another agreed, “...really looking at very individualized treatment that is going to meet each child’s need based on what their issues are as opposed to a generic program that every kid needs to try to fit into.”

**Staff**

Strengths of staff were discussed in great detail by all three groups, including personality characteristics, education, interpersonal skills and parental styles. The former foster youth discussed positive experiences with group home staff. Four participants in the interviews characterized staff as being motherly. One participant described a female staff member that was influential in his life because she pushed him to be better. He stated, “She pushed me and helped me out a lot. She’s like the
mother I never had." In addition to being motherly, four participants described staff positively as being caring. One participant described her experience with a staff member. "She cared all the time, even when we were mad at her. She really did what was best for us, and I really value her integrity." Five participants discussed staff that was able to build a rapport with them and identify commonalities. One participant shared about a staff, "I could actually talk to her. We had a lot of things in common. You know, as big as the age difference, we still had a lot of things in common."

Social workers also describe observing similar staff characteristics to be a strength. Of the eight respondents, five describe staff that are caring or compassionate about the children. Seven of the eight participants describe staff needing to have the ability to develop rapport with the children. Four participants shared the need for staff to be consistent. One participant describe ideal staff to be, "well-trained, minimum Bachelor's level, diverse backgrounds and experiences, able to avoid power struggles, maintaining warm, genuine connection while also keeping good boundaries, diverse age, gender, ethnicity..." Education
was a large factor, as six participants stated that staff should be educated.

The focus group participants discuss the education, on-going training and consistency of staff and administration. One participant explained that

…it should be that when staff sign up, they agree for consistent and continual training. In other words, they are constantly being given the skills to make them better staff in that home, not someone who is simply there for a six or eight hour shift to provide babysitting services.

Another participant laments that, “Consistency is so important to these kids ‘cause there is such a turnover with the staff that it is hard to keep consistency in the program and working with these kids.” Another major topic was that administration should be Master’s level or higher, in order to direct the needed management and treatment structure for the group home and its clients.

Structure

A structured environment is a characteristic common among group homes that was mentioned by all three groups. One former foster youth commented that she felt the structure and restrictions allowed her to gain the
discipline that she needed for adulthood. Furthermore, she elucidated that,

A lot of us had behavioral problems... So a lot of us acted out. So by being there, and being restricted and being told what to do, we were able to acquire the discipline that we needed. They were really stern. They had an objective for us basically, and that was to get it straight, properly.

All of the eight social workers commented that an advantage to group homes was that they promoted a structured environment. Examples of structure included the program’s behavior modification systems, supervision and staff. One social worker responded that a benefit they saw to their clients being placed in a group home is that, “they receive structure, supervision, and milieu therapy that would otherwise be unavailable to them.” Another shared that, “rigid structure promotes controlled behaviors.” The structure of a group home was discussed as providing stability and normalcy for the child.

The focus group discussed that structure is one of the reasons that children are in group homes, since foster homes provided minimal structure or supervision. One participant suggested that structure provides
consistency and predictability that are needed because, “their lives have been so unpredictable that [with consistency] they have some way to predict what is going to happen so that it decreases their anxiety level.”

Preparing for Emancipation

A large emphasis was placed on the child’s ability to be successfully prepared after they emancipate from the child welfare system. All three groups discussed the strengths of being prepared for emancipating from the system, as related to the group home experience. Of the eight former foster youth participants, four described that Independent Living Program (ILP) services were helpful to them. Three participants described that they currently had employment. One participant stated that the most beneficial aspect of independent living program services were the classes were you learned practical skills.

You learn how to go get a job, like you go do a lot of the steps through ILP, and the major one is interviews, resumes, how to get jobs...all the ILP preparing that I did, when I got out, I got a job fast...it wasn’t hard for me.
Two participants stated that they enjoyed the after-care programs that help transition you into adulthood. Another participant shared that there were financial benefits after emancipating, such as financial aid for college.

Seven social workers stated that group homes prepare their clients for emancipation by transporting them to ILP classes and facilitating the client’s to expand on learned skills. One worker included a variety of examples including,

- taking them to all their ILP classes, help them get a job, teach them about responsibility and have them do more for themselves—such as learn how to cook, clean and find transportation...help them get their ID’s and talk to them about their plans for the future such as going to college.

Focus group participants discussed the need to develop independent living skills as well. One participant stated that she’s seen group homes, not only utilize the county ILP services, but have also developed their own program to help their clients emancipate.

Some of the good group homes have workbooks the kids use. They meet with them a couple times a week and they actually do the whole workbook on how to
balance a checkbook, how you get a job. So they would do role playing on how you fill out a job application...Take them to the mall and we are going to fill out and turn in five job applications.

Participants also described developing the practical skills of the client as a positive aspect of group homes by allowing them to cook, plan menus and make their own medical and dental appointments.

Recreational Activities

The availability of a diverse amount of recreational activities for the children to participate in was a common theme among the three groups. Four of the seven participants stated that they enjoyed the outings that were available in the group home. One participant recalled,

The lifestyle that I was living before that, I would have never been able to go to the movies, I would have never been able to see the beach...We were stuck in the house or the neighborhood. So [the group home] really made a point to get us out there as often as possible and experience things we weren’t able to experience before, without them.
Examples of other recreational activities, as provided by the interviews, included going to the gym, traveling, community service, being given money to spend on day passes, playing sports and being involved in community advocacy projects. One of the interviewees that did community services describes the benefit of it.

We did a lot of community service, like we helped a lot in convalescent homes...and now, a lot of it, I can put on my resume, and it looks good...I have so many jobs that I couldn’t imagine getting if I didn’t have that on it.

Social workers commented on the various activities that were advantageous for their clients. Six of the eight social workers stated that their clients are offered participation in sports activities. Five respondents shared that the group homes take the children on amusement park outings. One social worker recapitulates by listing the following activities that they’ve seen available to their clients, “involvement in team sports, hobbies, clubs of interest to the child, amusement parks, hikes, agricultural experiences, activities involving animals...anything that helps the client feel ‘normal,’”
The focus group participants discussed connections with the community as a part of recreational activities for the children. Other recreational activities they have observed include participation in dance lessons, camp, ropes course, trips to the symphony and eating at nice restaurants. They describe recreational activities that children in typical households and families would participate in. One participant shared,

We have a home...that during breaks, the entire home goes on really fabulous vacation trips, Jamaica, the Grand Canyon, rented a motor home and saw part of the United States. They went and got releases for the kids to leave the state. They didn’t do this because they wanted to see the places. They did it because these children have never had that kind of experience.

Summary

Although there were themes distinctive to each of the groups in which data was collected, there were seven major themes that were consistent among the former foster youth interviews, social worker questionnaires, and the focus group with the group home screening committee. The
seven meta-themes are viewed as strengths among Riverside County group homes that can be generalized as strengths among all group homes. These seven strengths include: providing education support for the children, addressing the mental health needs of the children in a therapeutic and diverse manner, individualizing the approaches and treatments to the child, having caring and nurturing, and educated staff that make the effort to build a rapport with the children, providing a structure conducive to minimizing the behavioral problems of the child, adequately and successfully preparing the clients for emancipation, and providing the children with recreational activities that children in family settings might participate in.
CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Introduction

This qualitative study was designed to explore the strengths of group homes in Riverside County. This study found that there are positive aspects that, according to the three populations sampled, were seen as strengths of group homes. This supports the study's research question and hypothesis that there are effective group homes in Riverside County and that by identifying and sharing the positive aspects, changes can be made to better meet the needs of children in group homes. These aspects were categorized into seven meta-themes. The themes that were discovered during the study will be discussed, as well as the limitations of the study. Based on the review of literature and results of the research, recommendations for social work practice, policy, and research will be made in an attempt to create positive changes in group homes in order to better meet the needs of children in foster care.
Discussion

The hypothesis of this study was that there are effective group homes in Riverside County that can contribute to meeting the needs of certain children when those positive aspects are identified, and that will benefit the child welfare system overall. Those aspects were identified by posing this study's research question: "What are the characteristics that increase the effectiveness of group homes as perceived by Group Home Screening Committee members, social workers and former group home clients?"

The results of this study support findings of studies cited in the literature review. Consistent with the literature review, this study found that for children with certain characteristics, group home strengths include: meeting the mental health needs of clients; staff characteristics; teaching academic, social, and independent living skills; providing positive social relationships; and contributing to the clients' personal growth.

Through analysis of the data, providing educational support to clients materialized as a theme; however, there was limited literature that specifically addressed
providing educational support in residential care. According to participants from each population sampled, group homes that took an active role in the education of the clients were viewed as more effectively meeting the needs of the clients. Involvement in the education of the clients took a variety of forms such as designating a homework time, communication with teachers, tutoring, encouraging or requiring attendance, and participating in Individualized Education Program meetings. The overall consensus was that when group homes take an active role in ensuring that children's educational needs are met, it is a strength.

Meeting the mental health needs of clients was revealed as a consistent theme throughout the literature. In this study, addressing mental health needs was identified by all three populations as an element that contributed to effectively meeting the needs of clients. Children are placed in group homes because a less restrictive environment is not suitable for them. These children exhibit a range of behaviors that stem from mental health issues and require treatment. According to the results of the study, training staff in how to work with clients with mental health issues is important when
working with group home clients. Additionally, many participants reflected that the development of treatment plans should be psychologically informed. It was suggested that therapists should be employed by the group homes themselves and accessible to the clients when needed, such as in a time of crisis.

Individualizing approaches and treatment plans of each child as a strength was a finding of the study that had not appeared often in the reviewed literature, but was recognized by Pazaratz (2003). Group home clients have unique problems and goals and should be treated as an individual and allowed to make choices regarding their own lives (Pazaratz, 2003). Treating each child as an individual and developing a treatment plan that builds on the client’s strengths and addressing their unique needs was a concept that surfaced frequently during this study. Both former foster youth and professionals reflected that group home client’s interests should be utilized in order to motivate them. Along with individualizing the program of each child, the study also revealed the importance of respecting and treating each child as an individual.

A major strength that was identified by the study participants was staff member qualities. The
characteristics of staff that were described as adding to the effectiveness of group homes were: the ability to be caring and nurturing, to build rapport with clients, to provide structure, and to actively engage the youth. This was consistent with the literature that emphasized the important role of staff members in the treatment of children in group homes (Ackerman & Dozier, 2005; Lipscombe, Moyers, & Farmer, 2004; Pazaratz, 2003; Mustillo, Dorsey & Farmer, 2005; Zegers et al., 2006). During interviews, several former foster youth reported that the staff member that was most influential to them had "motherly" characteristics. The educational level of staff was also perceived as a strength. Education and training in the behavioral sciences, in order to increase understanding of the clients' issues and behaviors, was seen particularly as useful in increasing the effectiveness of the group home.

Literature has indicated that foster youth experience a particularly difficult transition to adulthood because of their lack of social support and independent living skills. Independent living skills training can ease the transition for foster youth and provide for more positive outcomes (Georgiades, 2005;
Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2006; Pecora, 2000; Reilly, 2003). Data from the study illustrates that a strength of group homes is successfully preparing clients for emancipation. This involves facilitating involvement in county-wide Independent Living Programs as well as programs within the group homes. Group homes that assisted clients in finding employment, money management, and other daily living activities were recognized as effectively meeting the needs of clients in the area of preparing for emancipation.

Recreational activities that were identified as being a strength of group homes were those activities that provided children with experiences that were comparable to a "normal" family situation. These included participation in sports, amusement parks, outdoor activities, engaging with animals, and other activities. A point of view was shared that group homes that involved clients in an array of activities benefitted the clients by allowing them to obtain social skills in a variety of social settings.
Limitations

Due to the nature of the study, there are some limitations that may affect the data that was collected. One limitation is in the how participants were gathered. Former foster youth were initially recruited through California Youth Connection, and then a snowball sampling technique was used. Youth involved in California Youth Connection may not accurately represent the former foster youth population because they are more likely to be functioning at a higher level than their peers. Likewise the participants that were recruited through snowball sampling had all remained connected to either California Youth Connection or another adult in some capacity. This does not account for foster youth that may have not faired as well in group homes and could not be located. The youth all had a different number of placements and different lengths of time in the foster care system. Therefore the findings from this study cannot be generalized to the experience of all former foster youth.

Likewise, the sample of group home social workers that completed the questionnaire may not fully represent social workers throughout Riverside County. During the data collection of the study, the group home unit was in
the process of relocating to a new office. This extenuating circumstance may have decreased the number of participants. In addition, the average length of time the participants were employed by Riverside County was only 1.5 years. Their responses to the questionnaire are based on a relatively small amount of experience.

Another limitation of the study is in regards to the responses given by all three samples. The tools used to collect data were written in an attempt to extract the strengths that have been observed in Riverside County group homes. However, when analyzing the data, it was difficult to discern if the respondents were referring to strengths that they had observed or if they were providing suggestions about what group homes should do. The purpose of the study is to better understand the elements of group homes that are effective and to build upon those. If participants are providing suggestions rather than elements that are currently implemented, the data may be impacted. Additionally, the tools used to collect the qualitative data were developed for this study and not tested, so the reliability and validity of the tools are unknown.
Recommendations for Social Work Practice, Policy and Research

The results of the study indicate that there are strengths of group homes that can be built upon to better serve the needs of clients. Group homes are intended to serve children with mental health and behavioral issues whose needs are not met in a less restrictive or structured environment. However, in some group homes, the minimal requirements of care are met and the group home serves as a "holding tank" for children with complex needs. The study shows that the group homes that were considered to be exceptional went above and beyond the minimal requirements and took an active role in their client's lives.

The same qualities that make good parents also make good group homes. High standards for the care of children in group homes need to be established in order to ensure that all group homes are exceptionally meeting the needs of their clients. Group homes should be actively involved in client's education, preparation for emancipation, and addressing their mental health needs. Requirements for the amount and types of recreational activities should be established and monitored. Staff should be carefully
screened and trained in order to provide care and consistency to clients. The study shows that high standards can be met because there are group homes excelling in these areas presently within Riverside County.

Further research is needed in this area because although group homes are not a preferred foster care placement, for those children with complex needs they are the most suitable option to meet those needs. Research should guide the development of specific policy and program changes that would be beneficial to foster youth in residential care. For example, although there is literature supporting the benefits of providing structure in group homes, there is little research detailing the ways in which structure can be conceptualized and carried out by group home staff. By understanding the elements that contribute to the effectiveness of a group home, the needs of children in the foster care system will be better met.

Conclusion

It has been shown that the foster care system does a poor job of raising children, especially those with
mental health issues. Group homes have the ability to provide a safe, therapeutic, and positive environment to children who have experienced abuse and neglect. However, many group homes provide care at a level that intends only to meet the minimal requirements. Improvements need to be made to the current group home system in order to better meet the needs of the children placed in their care.

This study shows that there are group homes in Riverside County that are effectively meeting the needs of children in several areas. These areas are: providing educational support for the children, addressing the mental health needs of the children in a therapeutic and diverse manner, individualizing the approaches and treatments to the child, having caring, nurturing and educated staff that make the effort to build a rapport with the children, providing structure conducive to minimizing the behavioral problems of the child, adequately and successfully preparing the clients for emancipation, and providing the children with recreational activities that children in families participate in. These strengths can be replicated in
other facilities and can lead to better outcomes for our most vulnerable youth.
APPENDIX A

GROUP HOME SCREENING COMMITTEE

FOCUS GROUP OUTLINE
Group Home Screening Committee
Focus Group Outline

I. Introductions
   a. Of researchers and participants
   b. Remind of audio taping and being audio taping

II. Purpose of Focus Group
   a. To discover characteristics that make group homes effective
      i. Our primary focus is on the child welfare system.
   b. Consider group homes that are, in your opinion, above average when answering the following questions:

III. Questions:
   a. Child
      i. What are some of the common reasons that children are referred to the Group Home Screening Committee?
      ii. What are the needs of those children that can be effectively met in a group home?
      iii. What strengths can you identify among Riverside County group homes?
   b. Program Structure
      i. When looking at the program structure of group homes, what elements do you consider when recommending group homes?
      ii. How do you think the level system of group homes coordinates with the services that home provides?
   c. Therapeutic Environment
      i. What services do you feel that group homes are able to provide more effectively than other placement options?

IV. Conclusion
   a. What elements do you feel are key to making a group home successful?
   b. Are there any innovative program characteristics that you are aware of in group homes that you would like to see implemented elsewhere?
   c. Is there anything else you would like to share, within your scope of knowledge, that may be beneficial to understanding what makes an effective group home?

V. Debriefing Statement
APPENDIX B

GROUP HOME UNIT SOCIAL WORKERS QUESTIONNAIRE
Group Home Unit Social Worker
Questionnaire

Length of time, in years, as an employee with Riverside County Children's Services?

Highest educational degree level? _____ Major: ______________________________

Optional Information (used for demographical purposes only):

Gender:  □ Female  □ Male  Age: _____  Ethnicity: __________

Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability. If you need more space, feel free to use the backside of this sheet.

1. Can you explain how your clients benefit from placement in a group home?

2. What are the typical characteristics of those children placed in group homes?

3. When you conduct monthly home contacts, what are characteristics that standout in effective group homes?

4. In your opinion, what exceptional ways have you seen group homes address or modify behavior?
5. What percentage of your clients do you feel are appropriately matched in a group home that meets their needs effectively?

__________________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________________

6. What types of selection or matching processes do group homes have that you think result in effective placements?

__________________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________________

7. Can you provide an example of how a group home excels in meeting the needs of children?

__________________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________________

8. Describe what you feel to be the ideal composition of group home staff?

__________________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________________

9. In your experience, what recreational activities are offered in group homes that you feel were beneficial to your clients?

__________________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________________
10. In what ways have you seen group homes support the educational needs of their clients?

11. How do you feel group homes promote a therapeutic environment?

12. From a strengths-based perspective, are there any additional observations or information that you have about the characteristics that increase the effectiveness of group homes?
APPENDIX C

FORMER GROUP HOME CLIENTS INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
Interview Questions for Former Group Home Clients

1. Tell us about your group home experience.

2. What were the benefits, if any, of being in a group home?

3. In what ways, if any, do you feel that your group home experience positively contributed to your life as an adult now?

4. Describe one of your most memorable moments living in a group home.

5. Can you give an example of a way in which the group home supported your educational needs?

6. Were there any recreational activities that you felt to be highly beneficial to you while living in the group home?

7. Think of a group home staff that was influential in your life. What about them made them important to you?

8. Are there any other positive experiences or aspects about your group home experience that you’d like to share with us?

9. If you could share any suggestions with group home administrators, staff, social workers, etc. for how to improve the well-being of children in group homes, what would it be?
APPENDIX D

INFORMED CONSENTS
Informed Consent for Focus Group

The study in which you are being asked to participate is part of a research project conducted by California State University, San Bernardino Master's of Social Work students Liza Fimbres and Rose Solomon. The above-mentioned students are under the supervision of faculty member Laurel Brown, MSW, CSUSB Department of Social Work. The purpose of the research is to gain an understanding of the characteristics of group homes that increase their effectiveness in providing services to children. This study has been approved by the Department of Social Work Sub-Committee of the Institutional Review Board of California State University, San Bernardino.

In this study, you will be asked to participate in a focus group regarding the topic of characteristics of group homes that increase their effectiveness. The focus group should take about 30 to 45 minutes to complete. All responses will be held in the strictest of confidence by the researchers. Your name will not be reported with your responses. All data from the focus group will be reported in group form only. You may receive the group results after September of 2008 by contacting the Riverside County Children's Services Division.

Your participation in this study is voluntary and you are free to discontinue your participation at any time during the study without penalty. You are free to not answer any of the questions asked during the focus group. When you have completed the focus group, you will receive a debriefing statement describing the study in more detail. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts associated with participation in the study. Possible benefits from the research are adjustments made to group homes in order to increase their effectiveness as well as furthering the knowledge of group home strengths.

If you have any questions or concerns about this study, please feel free to contact Ms. Laurel Brown at 909-537-5501.

☐ By checking this box, I acknowledge that I have been informed of, and that I understand, the nature and purpose of this study, and I freely consent to participate. I also acknowledge that I am at least 18 years of age.

☐ By checking this box, I agree to be audio taped for the duration of the focus group.

Date: ______________________________
Informed Consent for Questionnaire

The study in which you are being asked to participate is part of a research project conducted by California State University, San Bernardino Master’s of Social Work students Liza Fimbres and Rose Solomon. The above mentioned students are under the supervision of faculty member Laurel Brown, MSW, CSUSB Department of Social Work. The purpose of the research is to gain an understanding of the characteristics of group homes that increase their effectiveness in providing services to children. This study has been approved by the Department of Social Work Sub-Committee of the Institutional Review Board of California State University, San Bernardino.

In this study, you will be asked to fill out a questionnaire regarding the topic of characteristics of group homes that increase their effectiveness. The questionnaire should take about 20 to 40 minutes to complete. All responses will be held in the strictest of confidence by the researchers. Your name will not be reported with your responses. All data from the questionnaire will be reported in group form only. You may receive the group results after September of 2008 at the Riverside County Children’s Services Division.

Your participation in this study is voluntary and you are free to discontinue your participation at any time during the study without penalty. You are free to skip any of the questions asked during the questionnaire. When you have completed the questionnaire, you will receive a debriefing statement describing the study in more detail. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts associated with participation in the study. Possible benefits from the research are adjustments made to group homes in order to increase their effectiveness as well as furthering the knowledge of group home strengths.

If you have any questions or concerns about this study, please feel free to contact Ms. Laurel Brown at 909-537-5501.

☐ By checking this box, I acknowledge that I have been informed of, and that I understand, the nature and purpose of this study, and I freely consent to participate. I also acknowledge that I am at least 18 years of age.

Date: ______________________________
Informed Consent for Interview

The study that you are being asked to participate in is part of a research project conducted by California State University, San Bernardino Master’s of Social Work students Liza Fimbres and Rose Solomon. The above mentioned students are under the supervision of faculty member Laurel Brown, MSW, CSUSB Department of Social Work. The purpose of the research is to gain an understanding what makes group homes effective. This study has been approved by the Department of Social Work Sub-Committee of the Institutional Review Board of California State University, San Bernardino.

In this study, you will be asked to participate in an interview about the characteristics of group homes that increase their effectiveness. The interview should take about 20 to 40 minutes to complete. All responses will be confidential. Your name will not be reported with your responses. All information from the interview will be reported in group form only. You may receive the group results after September of 2008 at the Riverside County Children’s Services Division.

Your participation in this study is voluntary and you are free to stop your participation at any time during the study without penalty. You are free to skip any of the questions asked during the interview. When you have completed the questions, you will receive a debriefing statement describing the study in more detail. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts associated with participation in the study. Possible benefits from the research are adjustments made to group homes in order to increase their effectiveness as well as furthering the knowledge of group home strengths.

If you have any questions or concerns about this study, please feel free to contact Ms. Laurel Brown at 909-537-5501.

☐ By checking this box, I acknowledge that I have been informed of, and that I understand, the nature and purpose of this study, and I freely consent to participate. I also acknowledge that I am at least 18 years of age.

☐ By checking this box, I agree to be audio taped during the interview

Date: ______________________________

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APPENDIX E

DEBRIEFING STATEMENTS
Debriefing Statement for Focus Group

The focus group you have just participated in was designed to gain an understanding of the characteristics of group homes that increase effectiveness. The aim of this study is to promote a more positive perspective on group homes by raising awareness of their strengths. By identifying strengths, group homes can gain knowledge of and build upon assets to better meet the needs of children in the child welfare system.

Thank you for your participation in this focus group. Your contribution to furthering the knowledge of group home strengths is greatly appreciated. If you have any questions about the study, please feel free to contact Ms. Laurel Brown, faculty supervisor, at 909-537-5501. If you would like to obtain a copy of the group results of this study, please contact Riverside County Children’s Services Division or access the Pfau Library at California State University, San Bernardino after September of 2008.
Debriefing Statement for Questionnaire

The questionnaire you have just completed was designed to gain an understanding of the characteristics of group homes that increase effectiveness from a social workers view. The aim of this study is to promote a more positive perspective on group homes by raising awareness of their strengths. By identifying strengths, group homes can gain knowledge of and build upon assets to better meet the needs of children in the child welfare system.

Thank you for your time and energy in completing the questionnaire. We understand that social workers have various responsibilities and time constraints. Your contribution to furthering the knowledge of group home strengths is greatly appreciated. If you have any questions about the study, please feel free to contact Ms. Laurel Brown, faculty supervisor, at 909-537-5501. If you would like to obtain a copy of the group results of this study, please contact Riverside County Children’s Services Division or access the Pfau Library at California State University, San Bernardino after September of 2008.
Debriefing Statement for Interview

The interview you have just completed was designed to understand the characteristics of group homes that increase effectiveness from the viewpoint of former foster youth. The purpose of this study is to promote a more positive perspective on group homes by raising awareness of their strengths. By identifying strengths, group homes can gain knowledge of and build upon assets to better meet the needs of children in the child welfare system.

Thank you for your participation in this interview. Your contribution is greatly appreciated. We'd like to offer you this $5 gift card to a fast food restaurant for allowing us to interview you. If you have any questions about the study, please feel free to contact Ms. Laurel Brown, faculty supervisor, at 909-537-5501. If you would like to obtain a copy of the group results of this study, please contact Riverside County Children's Services Division or access the Pfau Library at California State University, San Bernardino after September of 2008.
REFERENCES


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:
   Assigned Leader: Rose Solomon
   Assisted By: Liza Fimbres

2. Data Entry and Analysis:
   Assigned Leader: Liza Fimbres
   Assisted By: Rose Solomon

3. Writing Report and Presentation of Findings:
   a. Introduction and Literature
      Assigned Leader: Liza Fimbres
      Assisted By: Rose Solomon
   b. Methods
      Assigned Leader: Rose Solomon
      Assisted By: Liza Fimbres
   c. Results
      Assigned Leader: Liza Fimbres
      Assisted By: Rose Solomon
   d. Discussion
      Assigned Leader: Rose Solomon
      Assisted By: Liza Fimbres