



Foster Parent Support And Retention: A Policy Approach

By: Leah Hamilton

Abstract

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FOSTER PARENT SUPPORT AND RETENTION: A POLICY APPROACH

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Foster parent retention is an important, yet often overlooked, component to long term outcomes for children in the foster care system. A recent pilot study examining the perspectives of four Arkansas foster care caseworkers found that, much like the rest of the country, Arkansas experiences high foster parent attrition. This current study explores the perceived effectiveness among sixteen foster parents of the Foster Parent Support Act of 2007 for improving retention in Arkansas. It was discovered that Arkansas foster parents were largely unaware of the act and reported insufficient support, voice and information in the child welfare process.

Keywords: Foster care, Child welfare policy, Foster parent retention.

Introduction

Among the myriad of issues facing American child welfare professionals, foster parents retention has become a growing concern in the past 20 years. High turnover and insufficient recruitment has led to a shrinking and largely inexperienced pool of foster parents. Many agencies report foster parent turnover between 30 and 50 percent per year (Christian, 2002). Caseworkers in Arkansas report similar concerns (Hamilton, 2011). Unfortunately, because there is no national database of foster parents, it is impossible to track the full extent of the problem (Unknown, 2008). Christian (2002) explains that insufficient numbers of qualified (trained and state certified) foster parents increases the likelihood of inappropriate placements, disruptions and placement in expensive institutional settings. The following study analyzes Arkansas' legislative effort to improve foster parent retention. First, however, the theoretical importance of foster care stability must be established.

Literature Review

Attachment Theory

John Bowlby's (1988) theory of attachment, established in the mid-twentieth century, helps to support the connection between child well-being and foster care. A British child psychiatrist,

Bowlby's work was influenced by the work of Harry Harlow, an American animal psychologist (Van der Horst, LeRoy, & Van der Veer, 2008). Harlow studied Rhesus monkeys and discovered that those raised in isolation (without a primary caregiver) exhibited heightened anxiety and anti-social behaviors.

For his own research, Bowlby separated young children, between twelve months and four years, from their mothers and recorded the response (Van der Horst et al., 2008). Some children would react with great anxiety; others would be nervous for a moment and then begin playing, while still others reacted with complete indifference to the abandonment. From these experiments, Bowlby defined attachment as a child's preference for proximity to certain caregivers over others (Oosterman & Schuengel, 2008).

Attachment to others tends to develop over time, as a child expresses needs (for food, protection, comfort) and those needs are met by the caregiver (Oosterman & Schuengel, 2008). When the child's needs are met, he/she learns that his caregiver can be relied upon to meet future needs. Children who learn that the adults around them *cannot* be relied upon often form "insecure" or "anxious" attachments.

Bowlby believed that repeated separation from the primary caregiver can cause permanent psychological harm (Van der Horst et al., 2008). While future attachments are possible after separation, early trauma can have deleterious effects.

Bowlby's attachment theory states that grief, anger and distress as the result of temporary or permanent loss of access to existing attachment figures can be resolved only when children are able to develop attachment relationships with alternative caregivers; however, exposure to extreme rearing conditions may diminish the possibilities of forming attachment relationships with new caregivers (Oosterman & Schuengel, 2008, p. 611).

In essence, children can recover from some but not all interruptions in the attachment process.

While Bowlby's work focused primarily on biological mothers and their infants, research has found that children are able to form attachments with multiple biological and non-biological caregivers (Simmel, 2007). These studies provide hope that children placed in foster care may have the ability to regain trust and build attachments with foster or kinship providers.

However, research also suggests that the ability to attach to caregivers diminishes as children progress from one foster home to another. Children who relocate to a new foster care home multiple times tend to exhibit more emotional and behavioral problems (Fernandez, 2009). Ironically, these problems often lead to placement disruption and subsequent moves, compounding the sense of loss and anxiety. Some studies have discovered a link between multiple foster placements and poor adjustment, even after adoption. One such study found that the strongest predictors of behavior problems among adopted children include sexual abuse, neglect and multiple foster placements (Simmel, 2007).

Rubin, O'Reilly, Luan and Localio (2007) support the need for minimal disruption to the attachment process. They find that children not achieving a permanent placement in the first eighteen months after removal from the home are 36-63 percent more likely to exhibit behavioral problems, even when other potential causes are held constant (Rubin et al., 2007). Conversely, children who achieve stability within the first 45 days of placement exhibit the fewest behavioral issues. This statistic is significant, as one in three foster children fail to achieve permanency in the first eighteen months (Rubin et al., 2007).

Finally, researchers found that the *quality* of foster parents can influence whether a child is able to establish a secure attachment in placement, even more so than other factors, such as child

characteristics (Oosterman & Schuengel, 2008). Several studies have revealed a strong association between a foster parent's attention and response to child needs and "attachment security of the foster child" (Oosterman & Schuengel, 2008, p. 612). Still, it is important to note that children are incredibly resilient. When finally achieving placement stability, with quality care, improvements are often seen in emotional and behavioral problems and school performance (Fernandez, 2009).

Foster Parent Retention and Child Outcomes

While the ultimate goal of child welfare services is, and should continue to be, the safe reunification of biological families, too little research focuses upon the quality and continuity of care children receive while in temporary placement, or permanent foster care, given the importance of attachment relationships. Foster parents who are able to provide a stable, nurturing home facilitate greater resilience and positive outcomes in abused and neglected children. While limited research exists regarding the positive effects of foster care placement, the following will illustrate the important role foster parents can play in the larger child welfare process.

Horwitz, Balestracci, and Simms (2001) administered the Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scale to 120 children entering foster care in one Connecticut county. The mean score for all children at placement was well below national averages. In other words, children entering care exhibited more negative behavioral issues than children not in foster care. After twelve months of foster care placement, the mean score for these children was within the national average range, meaning that children had 'caught up' to their non-foster care peers. Another longitudinal study of children in foster care discovered statistically significant gains in academic achievement and IQ after five years in care (Fanshel & Shinn, 1978).

Turning to a different cohort of foster care children, Colton, Aldgate, and Heath (1990-91) paired 49 foster children with same age and gender children receiving services from the Department of Human Services who remained in their biological home. It was found that the two groups had similar educational outcomes, but the children in foster care had significantly lower levels of antisocial behavior.

These gains can be lost, however, if quality foster parents are not retained and children must be moved to a new placement each time a foster home closes. With one-third of new foster parents intending to quit after only six months (Denby, Rindfleisch, & Bean, 1999), placement instability is significant. As discussed previously, the number of foster placements is negatively associated with positive child outcomes (Fernandez, 2009; Rubin et al., 2007). According to the National Conference of State Legislators (Christian, 2002), increased support to foster parents can lead to improved outcomes for foster children such as improved mental health (Oosterman & Schuengel, 2008), academic performance and behaviors (Fernandez, 2009). In addition, increased foster parent support lowers costs for the state, particularly when institutionalized care for foster children is prevented (Christian, 2002). In other words, when children are not "bounced" from foster home to foster home, they are less likely to need expensive institutional care later on.

Foster Parent Retention in the United States

Very few studies, however, have investigated the reasons for high foster parent attrition. The most commonly cited reason in the existent literature include difficult child behaviors, lack of

agency support and communication and a feeling of powerlessness (Denby, Rindfleisch, & Bean, 1999). Brown and Calder (2000) found that foster parents most desired “good relationships with social workers” and “adequate payment for services.”

Foster parent retention has a significant impact on the quality of care for foster children. For example, if qualified foster parent turnover is as high as 50 percent per year (Christian, 2002), then we can assume that the remaining pool of foster parents is largely inexperienced and less prepared to address the specialized needs of children in care (Fernandez, 2009). It can also be assumed that inexperienced foster parents will require greater support from caseworkers and consume more worker time.

Arkansas Foster Parent Support Act of 2007

In 2002, the Federal Administration for Children and Families conducted its first Child and Family Service Review in the State of Arkansas (Unknown, 2002). The report found that, among other goals, the state of Arkansas needed to improve recruitment and retention of foster families serving minority and disabled children. Since that time, the State of Arkansas has established a foster parent retention and recruitment work group (Unknown, 2008). According to the group’s minutes, members have had a difficult time measuring improved recruitment and retention as no database of foster parents in Arkansas currently exists.

Simultaneously, the Arkansas State Legislature has sought new ways to support and ultimately retain foster parents. In 2007, Arkansas State Senator Sue Madison (“Foster Parent Support Act,” 2007) sponsored the Foster Parent Support Act. Essentially, this legislation is a foster parent “bill of rights.” Several states have initiated a foster parent bill of rights, with the intention of improving satisfaction and retention. In a personal communication with Senator Madison, she stated that the bill was written in several work group meetings, with input from active foster parents, at the Department of Human Services (Madison, 2009).

This act appears to be the state’s most prominent attempt to support and retain foster parents. It includes 22 separate rights for foster parents and notes that “it is in the best interests of Arkansas’s child welfare system to acknowledge foster parents as active and participating members of this system and to support them” (“Foster Parent Support Act,” 2007). Further, the act states that “when policies regarding foster care and adoptive placement are developed by the Division of Children and Family Services of the Department of Human Services and other child placement agencies, those policies shall be designed to support and aid foster parents.” In addition, the act gives foster parents the right to be treated with respect, as an “integral member of the professional team,” to receive proper training, to have 24-hour access to the department, to receive all pertinent child information, to have the ability to refuse placement, to participate in case planning, to receive “timely and adequate financial reimbursement,” and to have the right to be considered as a long-term placement option in the event that a child is unable to return home (“Foster Parent Support Act,” 2007).

Symbolic Interactionism

The concept of symbolic interactionism is useful in understanding variant human reactions to seemingly analogous stimuli (Blumer, 1969). Blumer (1969) argues that humans both understand and react to situations based upon the personal meanings associated with the circumstance. For example, foster parents may “feel” supported based upon their conceptions of “support.” Further, these meanings are socially constructed. Indeed, in one study, foster parents

reported increased satisfaction simply by being included in the research process. The authors (Chamberlain, Moreland, & Reid, 1992) hypothesized that simply “being heard” created a feeling of being valued. Therefore, symbolic interactionism lays an important theoretical foundation for this study.

Research Question

Still, a large scale database of foster parents, including turnover rates and reasons for attrition is unavailable (Unknown, 2008). This author has been unable to find published information related to whether Arkansas has experienced the same difficulty retaining quality foster parents as cited in other studies. If Arkansas does have high foster parent turnover, is it for the same reasons as in other states? A recent pilot study examining the perspectives of four Arkansas foster care caseworkers found that, much like the rest of the country, Arkansas experiences high foster parent attrition. Caseworkers blamed a lack of training, poor reimbursement rates and inadequate ongoing support as the primary reasons for attrition rates (Hamilton, 2011).

For the purpose of this study, I plan to explore the perceived effectiveness among foster parents of the Foster Parent Support Act of 2007 for improving retention in Arkansas. From a symbolic interaction standpoint, understanding the meaning-making and perceptions of Arkansas foster parents is important to predicting future behavior (such as attrition) (Blumer, 1969). For example, the Chamberlain et al (1992) study discussed previously found that retention was improved when foster parents felt that they were “heard.” It will therefore be important to determine whether foster parents “feel” supported by the Foster Parent Support Act.

Methodology

As it appears to be one of the only, if not the only, legislative attempt to improve foster parent satisfaction and retention in Arkansas, it is important to discover if this policy has met its desired goals. Specifically, I asked long-term foster parents to: a) describe their general satisfaction with the department of human services, b) share their ideas for improving foster parent satisfaction and retention, c) describe their awareness of and knowledge about the Foster Parent Support Act, d) describe ways in which the policy has or has not been implemented, e) describe their level of satisfaction with the implementation of the policy, and f) discuss ways in which the policy addresses/does not address their specific concerns about foster parenting.

Design, Methods and Procedures

This study is constructivist in design (Rodwell, 1998) and draws upon social work’s strengths model (Segal, 2007; Weick, Rapp, Sullivan, & Kisthardt, 1989). The constructivist approach acknowledges the role of perspective in research and the strengths model argues that social policies must treat the target population as experts in their own lives. If foster parents are treated as valued members of the decision making team, it is assumed that all parties are more likely to benefit from resultant policy. This section will also describe the role of the constructivist approach and the strengths model in this study’s design.

A constructivist approach to qualitative research. Constructive research is proposed as an alternative to traditional, positivist inquiry. Positivists assume that there exists an *absolute* reality and the researcher is in pursuit of *absolute* truth. Constructivism argues that even if such an

absolute reality did exist, the limitations of human understanding make such knowledge virtually unattainable (Rodwell, 1998). Further, the examination of a phenomenon reliably changes the outcome. In this study, for example, my own professional experience undeniably influences the research process.

As a former foster care caseworker, I accumulated my perspectives on the role and importance of quality, experienced foster parenting. Rather than attempt to avoid “bias”, and ultimately fail, I have sought to acknowledge and describe the role of my own perspective. In this way, constructivists acknowledge the existence of multiple, overlapping realities, formed by the standpoint of the researcher, participant, and reader and influenced by the research process itself (Patton, 2002; Rodwell, 1998). Each of these elements interacts to create a prism through which light, or “truth”, is refracted. “For constructivists, there is no reality until it is perceived” (Rodwell, 1998, p. 27).

When the pursuit of absolute knowledge is removed, the researcher’s new goal is a thorough and multifaceted comprehension of the participant’s world view. Further, constructivists argue that it would be naïve to assume that this in depth understanding can be gained without influencing the process. “The observer not only disturbs nature, but shapes it” (Rodwell, 1998, p.29). In other words, the closer one gets to the surface of the water, the more likely a ripple will be created. It is argued that my experience as a foster care caseworker not only influences, but enhances the research process. After several years of interacting with and advocating for foster parents, I was able to join with participants, use insider language and elicit responses that another researcher might not have.

Research with a constructive design necessitates the following elements: natural setting, human instrument, qualitative knowledge, purposive sampling, emergent design, negotiated outcomes, ideographic interpretation, and trustworthiness (Rodwell, 1998). The following includes an overview of my attempt to incorporate each of these elements, to the extent possible, in a meaningful way.

Observing a phenomenon in its natural setting allows the researcher to understand the context in which it occurs. For this reason, I met with each participant in her or her home. Often, respondents were feeding infants or supervising small children while speaking with me. It is possible that responses were influenced by their distraction or hesitancy to speak about certain subjects in front of children. Indeed, I found this to be the case with several foster parents who asked children to leave the room when they needed to speak of a sensitive subject. Still, observing and interacting with foster parents in their home, with their children present, allowed me to gain a fuller understanding of their daily experience. Further, parents are potentially more at ease in their own home and more likely to speak openly than in an office environment.

A human research instrument is necessary to understand the complexity of meaning behind data. As the research instrument, I was able to exhibit empathy and join with foster parents, which I believe elicited a greater depth of data. In many ways, my experience as a caseworker aided the research process as I was already aware of the potential emotional “landmines” (i.e., children leaving the home) and was able to broach these subjects in a sensitive and compassionate way.

A purposive sample aids constructivist researchers in broadening the “scope and range of data exposed in order to look for multiple realities” (Rodwell, 1998, p. 35). The inclusion of expert participants (in this case, long term foster parents) allows the investigator to gain a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon. Several of the participants in this study have provided foster parenting for 20-30 years. Their institutional knowledge of foster care in Arkansas is resultantly greater than term-limited legislators or most DHS staff members, who

also experience high turnover. A few respondents were able to describe the drastic improvements in child welfare policy from historical legislation, such as expedited permanency planning, from a firsthand perspective.

Similarly, when gaining the input of experts, it is critical to allow their perspectives to guide findings, necessitating emergent data analysis techniques. If the intention is to fully understand the worldview of participants, it would be counterproductive to apply predetermined coding categories. Data analysis, described in greater detail below, did not include a priori coding. Instead, foster parent responses guided the coding process. Later, theoretical triangulation was employed to improve trustworthiness.

Salient for the purposes of this study, Patton (2002) argues that constructivist researchers concerned with social justice will “give added weight to the perspectives of those with less power and privilege” (p. 98). Though they play an integral role in the child welfare process, foster parent voices are often lost in policy making. Because the main focus of child welfare is the reunification of biological families (Samantrai, 1992), it may be that the experiences of foster parents are seen as outside the “true” agency mission. As previously discussed, however, the support and retention of quality foster parents is closely related to the ultimate well-being of children in care (Fernandez, 2009).

Constructivist study calls for participant feedback after preliminary data analysis, also known as *negotiated outcomes* (Rodwell, 1998). Participants should not only contribute their expertise, but influence the interpretation of data. For this reason, I chose to employ member checking once preliminary data analysis was complete. Foster parents were called and invited to provide feedback on preliminary results. Constructivist research, however, necessitates an understanding that findings ultimately apply only to the exact phenomenon observed (*ideographic interpretation*). Any application of findings in new dimensions of reality must be tentative and understood in context.

Finally, a constructivist approach requires a rigorous analysis of the research process itself, to aid trustworthiness (credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability). These concepts are loosely related to reliability and validity in positivist research, but incorporate a sophisticated understanding of the limitations of knowledge acquisition. Constructivist research fits well with social work values, which emphasize client expertise and situation-specific “interpretation of meaning” (Rodwell, 1998, p. 4). As discussed later in this section, several different methods, including theoretical triangulation, peer triangulation, member checking, and journaling, were engaged to improve trustworthiness.

Strengths perspective. Developed in response to traditional problem-oriented social work practice, the “strengths perspective rests on an appreciation of the positive attributes and capabilities that people express and on the ways in which individuals and social resources can be developed and sustained” (Weick, Rapp, Sullivan, & Kisthardt, 1989, p. 352). Research with foster parents can benefit from a strengths-based approach since users of this approach argue that social policy and programs need to be built upon the inherent strengths of individuals and communities, instead of focusing only upon its deficits (Segal, 2007).

Traditionally, social policy and evaluation have largely focused on problems existent in a population (e.g. poverty, mental illness, homelessness). Using a strengths-based approach to research with foster parents, however, participants are viewed as the experts of their own lives who are simply in need of temporary assistance to reach their full, inborn potential (Weick et al., 1989).

Research is a cooperative enterprise toward recognizing and developing individual and community strengths and resources. It does not seek to create new

and perhaps invasive technologies with which to intervene in the lives of others (Saleeby, 1992, p. 160).

This approach interprets the research process as collaboration between researcher and participant, each playing an integral role in the pursuit of understanding.

Beyond its problem orientation, the strengths perspective finds several other flaws in the traditional research paradigm. First, research methods that devalue the expertise of participants have the potential to further disempower the population under examination. Further, research not seeking to ultimately benefit participants is exploitive. Finally, proponents of the strengths perspective dispute the assumption that research can ever be fully objective (Saleeby, 1992).

Sample

Seeking the expertise of long-term, experienced foster parents in Arkansas, I employed a purposive sampling technique (Berg, 2008). I asked Department of Human Service administrators to recommend approximately ten foster parents to interview for my research study. With permission, I also used participant snowballing techniques. As a qualitative researcher, I was most interested in gaining the expertise of those with the greatest depth of knowledge and asked for the names of long-term (i.e. those with at least four years of experience) experienced foster parents.

Data Collection and Data Entry

The Arkansas Department of Human Services agreed to provide me with contact information for long-term foster care parents who were willing to participate in this study; they also permitted me to use snowball sampling. Once this information was received, I contacted foster parents by phone and scheduled a date and time to complete a face-to-face, tape recorded, in-depth interview in their home. The interviews lasted between 30-60 minutes.

Each face-to-face interview followed a semi-structured guide (see Appendix A). Semi-structured interviews, also known as semi-standardized, allow researchers to probe further into interviewee responses. This approach permits researchers to “approach the world from the subject’s perspective” (Berg, 2008, p. 33). The interview guide included rapport building questions to encourage participants to feel comfortable speaking about their experiences (Berg, 2008). To guide the interview I used encouragements (“Go on.” “Can you tell me more about that?”) to facilitate both depth and breadth of discussion on a topic. Following the interviews, I sent thank-you notes and a small gift (a \$10 Wal-Mart gift card) to participants. This allowed me to express gratitude for participant time, while the size and timing of the gift avoided a possible threat of coercion.

Informed consent. With each participant, I discussed confidentiality, benefits, risks and the respondent’s right to discontinue the interview at any time. Each interviewee was provided an Informed Consent and asked to sign a copy, which was kept in a locked cabinet in my office, along with interview transcriptions. This project received approval from the University of Arkansas Institutional Review Board in May, 2010.

Data entry. Interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. I hired a transcriber to complete transcriptions. Names were not included in the recording to protect confidentiality. Data were coded by both a member of my dissertation committee and myself. Differences were discussed in

an attempt to better triangulate research findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Due to the small sample size, demographic data were calculated by hand.

Data Analysis

Corresponding to my constructivist theoretical standpoint (Berg, 2008), the purpose of this research is to learn from foster parents about their experiences with the Arkansas foster care system and to ask their viewpoints regarding the Foster Parent Support Act. The use of emergent themes was critical to allow for inclusion of the “voices” of foster parents in this research (Charmaz, 2006). In asking questions such as “do foster parents feel supported?” I relied upon the personal perspectives of respondents to define problems and solutions. Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 41) argue that the use of emergent design is preferable as “what emerges as a function of the interaction of the inquirer and phenomenon is largely unpredictable in advance.” As recommended by Goetz and LeCompte (1981, p. 57), I scanned “the data for categories of phenomena and for relationships among such categories, developing working typologies and hypotheses upon examination of initial cases, then modifying and refining them on the basis of subsequent cases.”

In a preliminary review of the transcripts, I documented emergent themes, also known as open coding, (Berg, 2008) on a separate piece of paper. As I read, I continually “asked the data” my research question, with themes emerging as the answer to my questions (Merriam, 1998). Also in the first review, I wrote frequent theoretical notes. Qualitative researchers must not only describe, but interpret the data (Merriam, 1998). These theoretical notes served as a preliminary source for the discussion section of this paper.

In a second review, I looked more closely for instances of my emergent themes. Instances were highlighted, with theme titles written in the margins. Meanwhile, I continued to allow for the possibility of new emerging themes. As my understanding of the data became more nuanced, I was able to recognize broader categories to my themes. This process is often described as axial coding (Merriam, 1998). Finally, on a separate sheet of paper, I wrote the interview and page numbers of useful quotes to guide the upcoming “Findings” section.

To create triangulation and establish trustworthiness, a member of my dissertation committee also read the interviews and identified themes (Charmaz, 2006). Codes were compared and peer-debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was used to discuss discrepancies. It is important to note that, for a constructivist researcher, the goal of triangulation is not to negotiate “findings,” but to “capture and report multiple perspectives rather than seek a singular truth” (Patton, 2002, p. 546).

Trustworthiness

To establish trustworthiness in qualitative inquiry, the researcher is concerned with ensuring that findings accurately reflect the perspectives of participants (credibility), findings are applicable to other settings (transferability), similar findings would result from a replication of the study (dependability) and ensuring that the research is not biased by the inquirer (confirmability) (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In the next section, I will discuss the ways in which I have attempted to create a trustworthy study and avoid common research pitfalls.

Credibility. My method of sampling has the potential to create credibility problems (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For example, administrators may have been more likely to allow me access to

foster parents who had generally positive things to say about the department. To minimize this threat, I noted a priori that I would include no identifying information in the final report and keep interview transcriptions in a locked filing cabinet. Hopefully, this encouraged administrators to provide me with a wide range of foster parents while also allowing foster parents to speak more freely with me about their experiences. The use of a snowball sample also decreased the chances that participants were “cherry picked” by the department.

Triangulation is often used to improve credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As mentioned, I used an additional data analyst for the coding process. Theoretical triangulation was conducted by comparing my final results to those of other, similar studies. This allows the investigator to consider alternative explanations for research findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

To improve credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), I also employed member checking.

If the investigator is to be able to purport that his or her constructions are recognizable to audience members as adequate representations of their own (and multiple realities), it is essential that they be given the opportunity to react to them (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314).

Participants were called and asked whether the general themes accurately reflected their reality.

Transferability. The issue of transferability in qualitative research is not to be confused with generalizability. While quantitative researchers seek large, representative samples, qualitative research is concerned with gaining depth and breadth of information. This type of inquiry seeks to provide a rich description of methods and findings, so that the readers might determine applicability to their own setting (Hatch, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this section, I have attempted a detailed description of this study’s procedures and have attached the semi-structured interview guide (See Appendix A) to improve potential transferability.

Dependability. In order to improve dependability, or the study’s replicability, I maintained a research log/journal of my procedures and reactions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Further, each interview followed the same semi-structured interview guide. All interviews were conducted in participant homes and each respondent was asked to engage in member checking.

Confirmability. The journal I created also aided in improving confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This journal includes my own emotional processes and a reflexive ethnography regarding the research topic. A reflexive ethnography (Dulles, 1999), or a review of the researcher’s personal biases, is included in this report. This process allows the researcher to address possible prejudices and permits the reader to gain a broader understanding of the study and context. To avoid issues of subjectivity during the interviews, I avoided leading interview questions and use broad probes such as “uh-huh,” “go on” and “anything else?” to encourage responses (Berg, 2008).

Findings

Demographics

In this study, I spoke with ten foster mothers. Foster fathers were also involved in six of the interviews, for a total of sixteen respondents. Participants ranged in age from 34 to 74. In terms of age, three respondents were in their thirties, one in her forties, five in their fifties, five in their sixties and two foster fathers were in their seventies. Most respondents (13) reported non-

Hispanic white as race/ethnicity; however the sample also included one African American, one Native American and one Pacific Islander. All ten families were headed by a heterosexual married couple. Household sizes ranged from three to nine total persons, with an average of five. The ten foster homes included an average of 2.1 adults and 2.9 children. At the moment of interview, foster parents were caring for an average of 1.5 foster children (ranging from 0-4 children per home).

When asked about employment, seven participants were actively unemployed or retired, six worked full-time, two worked part-time and one respondent was seeking employment. Foster parents in this study had been licensed for an average of 12.8 years, with a range from 3-31 years. None of the respondents had been licensed in a state other than Arkansas. Interestingly, it was difficult to get an accurate picture of the number of children served by these foster parents. Several foster parents said that they lost count “around 100.” Others appeared to take pride in making their service “not about the numbers.” Responses ranged from fifteen to 700 children for one parent who had been licensed for more than 30 years.

Themes

According to the Arkansas Foster Parent Support Act of 2007, “it is in the best interests of Arkansas’ child welfare system to acknowledge foster parents as active and participating members of this system and to support them.” The act incorporates 22 provisions, outlined below, to reach this aim. Foster parents in this study were questioned regarding ways in which they do or do not feel supported by the Arkansas Department of Human Services. While most respondents had never heard of the Foster Parent Support Act and none had extensive knowledge of the state policy, interviews touched on many of the issues addressed by the act. This section outlines the act’s stipulations (in italics) and the extent to which each provision has or has not been provided, based upon the perspectives of foster parents in this study. Confidential information has been redacted.

9-28-903. *“Foster parents should be supported in the following manner:”*

(1)Treated by the Division of Children and Family Services of the Department of Human Services and other partners in the care of abused and neglected children with consideration, dignity, respect, and trust as a primary caregiver for foster children, including respect for the family values and routines of the foster parent;

A common complaint among respondents in this study was the feeling that the role of foster parent was given insufficient importance by child welfare workers. Many felt secondary to the process. One foster mother explained...

“I think it is like we are being left out of the circle. They are here for the mother, or the parents, the child, the therapist and the caseworker and then we should be someplace in that circle. And sometimes we are left out of that circle.”

Another said...

“I was *****’s foster mother for several years when the parents were locked up. And all of these kids have been part of our families....I had the whole family over here for Christmas’, Thanksgivings...the kids wouldn’t have had a holiday. But yet, I have no say so in what happens to these kids.”

Respondents often felt that their critical role in the life of foster children was overlooked. As one mother explained, “foster parents just need to be remembered...that your life is involved with that child, not just mom and dad or whoever it may be.” Put simply, another said, “the kids are with us 24/7.”

(2) Considered to be an integral member of the professional team caring for children in foster care;

Several participants expressed frustration in being left out of foster care agency meetings and having little input in placement decisions. One foster mother explained, “I always like to go to the staffing and there is a lot of times when no longer foster parents are included in the staffing...I’m not the only one. I’ve heard that from other foster parents.” Some respondents felt that this lack of input in decision making was a common cause of burnout for foster families. As one respondent explained, “I think the most difficult [part of foster parenting] is watching children sometimes get lost in the system.” Another stated...

“I think that a lot of times kids go home that shouldn’t go home and I think that this is what causes foster parents to want to quit. It is very upsetting for me too. But, I feel like me quitting isn’t going to help the situation either. But, I would say that has a lot to do with a lot of the people who do want to quit.”

A lack of voice (or control) in the system appeared to contribute to foster parent frustration, especially when decisions were made that seemed to ignore the best interests of foster children. One woman explained...

“There are times when decisions are made to make it easier on the caseworker, not necessarily what’s in the best interest of the child and that is really hard for me when they place children in places that you know are not good or send them back to things that are not good....That’s really hard for me.”

(3) Confidentiality regarding personal issues as provided by law and to be free from discrimination based on religion, race, color, creed, national origin, age, marital status, or physical handicap in matters concerning licensing approval;

No foster parents in this study expressed concern regarding confidentiality or discrimination. Two foster parents, who would soon reach the age at which they could no longer legally foster, felt that the upper age limit for foster parents should be adjusted.

(4)(A) Receive training that will enhance the skills and ability to cope as foster parents.

Foster parents in this study expressed mixed feelings about trainings offered by the department. They reported that some trainings were enjoyable and some were boring. Several foster parents wished that trainings could be offered at various times of day to accommodate

diverse schedules and that quality child care could be more widely available. One explained, "Getting the training is difficult because they don't offer childcare at all."

(B)The training shall include both standardized pre-service training and continuing education at least annually and at appropriate intervals, including without limitation the following purposes:

(i)To meet mutually assessed needs of the children in foster care;

Two foster parents in this study expressed a desire for trainings with more practical topics. For example, "I think they should be teaching classes on car seat safety." Further, a few respondents mentioned the possible benefit of having experienced foster parents conduct trainings. As one stated...

"I think that when the foster parents go through their training, if they would just have them come together and have any of the older foster parents that's done this before and let us tell them some of the things that has happened in the house."

One experienced foster parent was asked by her local agency to participate in trainings for new recruits. She felt that this practice should be expanded, explaining "I've got trainers that call me in to talk to the new foster parents, but they really need to call other old foster parents in more."

(ii)To inform foster parents of their responsibilities and opportunities as foster parents;

Two respondents felt that initial trainings were inadequate to fully prepare them for the responsibilities of foster parenting. A mother explained...

"It [training] does not prepare you for what you actually go through when you get your kid. I mean, it really doesn't. Because...the first kid that we took was just for a weekend. We did respite care and it was the hardest thing we ever did. When they left, I looked at my husband and I said, 'Did anything in that class prepare us for this?' and he was like 'No'."

(iii)To assist in the understanding of and dealing with family loss and separation wophen a child in foster care is placed, as well as when a foster child leaves the foster parent's home;

Several foster parents reported that they felt unprepared for the emotional burden of seeing children leave their home. One stated, "Our four year old, she went home and we decided we were going to get out of it because we'd had her for two years. We were very heartbroken." The same foster parent explained the emotional burnout this caused for her. "It's very hard. It's emotionally very hard for me." Another said, "There are times when I have to admit I get tired. I get tired."

(iv)To be informed of and have access to in a timely manner and at least annually any changes in applicable laws, guidelines, policies, and procedures that may impact the role of foster parents;

A common theme in these interviews was frustration with frequent changes in department policy. While two foster parents said that they understood the necessity in new regulations, several wished that they could be better informed about current and upcoming changes. One

parent desired that DHS “Have more meetings and let you know what’s going on.” Another said...

“I’m not an idiot. I’m an educated person. I resent that, because I’ve been there almost as long as or longer than they [workers and administrators] have. You know, I just want someone to say, ‘....this is our plan’.”

Further, several foster parents wished that DHS administrators would seek foster parent input for new policy decisions. As one mother explained, “The hierarchy needs to sit down and listen to foster parents because we don’t keep them [foster parents] without being good to them.” Another said...

“Before they even act, I wish what they would do is poll people, foster parents from around the state and say this is what we’re thinking about doing, how is that going to affect you? Is that going to make things more difficult for you and the ways you deal with the kids?”

(v)To receive specific training on investigations of alleged child abuse or neglect in a foster home. The training shall include the rights of a foster parent during an investigation; and

Most foster parents reported limited knowledge of their rights. One stated, “I know we should have more than we’ve got, but I don’t know what they are.” A few foster parents expressed fear and confusion about the process of being accused of child abuse. Further, they felt that they had few rights when allegations of abuse are made. One explained, “Foster parents don’t get a second chance. Parents get lots of second chances, but foster parents do not.” Another said...

“When something comes up that you’re told or they are told that you’ve done something or you did this and you’ve done that, oh, they’re right on you then. And it’s not even a true story. And that’s what we hate about it, and we’ve been done that way twice. I was about ready to walk out.”

One foster mother shared a story of changes in her foster parenting after another family was falsely accused of abuse.

“We had one family, a good friend of mine, foster parents, and they were awfully accused of something by a teenage girl. The way the department dealt with them was horrific. It was just absolutely awful. We considered quitting at that point. We changed how we did things. We stopped taking older kids...They took their biological kids. They took everybody. I can’t let that happen.”

(vi)To receive information about and have access to local and statewide support groups, including without limitation local and statewide foster parent associations;

Several of the respondents in this study were aware of their local foster parent association and had attended meetings. A few expressed a desire for more connections with other foster parents, but were unable to attend meetings due to the time of day.

(5)Have contact information for the appropriate staff of the child placement agency in order to receive information and assistance to access supportive services for children in the foster parent's care;

One of the most common themes in this research was a lack of communication with DHS workers and administrators. Every respondent expressed frustration at not being able to reach workers in a timely manner or caseworkers not completing required home visits. One foster mother explained, "We try to call somebody, nobody answers, we leave message after message after message for days and finally somebody returns the phone call." Another said, "Most of them [foster parents] quit because they don't seem to be able to get the help they need from their caseworkers." A third explained, "The caseworkers that we had never followed up."

Interestingly, all of the most experienced foster parents in this study (licensed for ≥ 20 years) mentioned that while caseworker communication was inconsistent, it was less of a concern for them. A foster mother licensed for over twenty years explained, "At this stage of the game, I can do most of my own footwork." Another 30-year veteran said...

"After you've been doing it for so long, unless you have an emergency, you're fine. If we have an emergency, then we contact them. But, if it's not an emergency, if it's some petty little thing...we can take care of it."

Still, another very common theme in this study was an appreciation for caseworkers. Every respondent enjoyed their relationships with most of their previous workers. One said, "I like the individual people because over the years you've forged a relationship with some of them." Another said, "I've had this one same worker for about 13 or 14 years. At this point, I almost won't take any cases unless they are hers because she gets the job done and she works diligently." One foster mother explained...

"We really enjoyed a lot of the caseworkers and the people who would bring the kids, the CASA workers. We just became friends with some of them and we just kind of built up relationships over the years with some of them. You know they really cared for kids."

The general consensus among respondents was that most caseworkers were doing their best and that bad caseworkers were uncommon. Most foster parents felt that caseworkers are overworked. One explained, "I think it's all people who are working hard and are overworked." A long-time veteran said, "Crazy people come in and crazy people go out." One respondent stated, "I know it's tough. I know their hands are tied with the number of people they can hire. They have no kind of control over how many cases come in. But I think they are stretched too thin." Another said, "Caseworkers, bless their hearts, are so overloaded."

Several respondents felt that this burden contributed to high worker turnover, which ultimately affected continuity in case management. For example, one foster parent stated,

"Caseworker turnover is a big thing....The little boy we adopted had five caseworkers before everything was said and done....Sometimes you'll go a week or two without even knowing you have a new caseworker. You know, if you're calling and trying to figure things out, trying to get appointments changed and things like that."

Another said, "I think the negative [aspect of foster parenting] would be the turnaround in caseworkers. Sometimes we have more than one caseworker in one case and they don't really know what is going on."

(6)Have access to services from the Division of Children and Family Services/Child Placement Agency twenty-four (24) hours a day, seven (7) days a week for assistance;

A few foster parents were frustrated that they were not given up-to-date contact information for DHS staff and that 24-hour support was not always available. One stated, "The hotline...was out of order. It had been for two months."

(7)(A) All information regarding the foster child that will impact the foster parent's home or family life in order to provide assurance of safety of the foster parent's family during the care of the child in foster care.

(B) Full disclosure of all medical, psychological, and behavioral issues of children in the foster parent's care;

(8)(A) To be informed prior to placement of all information regarding the child's behavior, background, health history, or other issues relative to the child that may jeopardize the health and safety of the foster family or alter the manner in which foster care should be provided.

(B) In an emergency situation, the child placement agency shall provide information as soon as it is available;

(9) Prior to placement, to review and discuss written information concerning the child and to assist in determining if the child is a proper placement for the foster family;

The previous three articles will be addressed together, as they deal with foster parent access to child information. The insufficiency of child information was a common complaint among foster parents in this study. Many felt that information was lost, unknown or intentionally withheld. One exasperated mother explained,

"We've had a couple of times where they haven't really told us everything they needed [to]. One of our things is no sexually abused children and in one situation...they knowingly placed somebody who had been sexually abused...We felt like they should be open and honest. We had a boy and a couple of months later we found out in his counseling session that they were leaving [information] off his shelter report. They said he was in danger of running away, danger of hurting himself. They didn't tell me some of those things. Those are important things to know as a parent."

A few respondents felt that some workers intentionally withheld child information to make placement easier. As one described...

"I've had a lot of trouble with caseworkers that are less than truthful. That's not enjoyable. We don't get all the information...or we get misinformation because it makes them [foster children] easier to place. If there are things in the history or illnesses, things that are going on with the kids that could impact us in the household, we need to know that. A lot of times, the workers won't divulge that information because they know you would say no [to placement]...I considered quitting...because of workers not being truthful."

(10) The ability to refuse placement of a child in the foster home or to request, upon reasonable notice, the removal of a child from the foster home without fear of reprisal or any adverse effect on being assigned any future foster child or adoptive placements;

When asked about their rights, several foster parents mentioned the right to turn down a potential placement. One said, “We have the right to refuse any child that they call us about.”

(11)Receipt of any information through the Division of Children and Family Services/Child Placement Agency regarding the number of times a child in foster care has been moved and the reasons for those moves and, upon request and within legal guidelines or as provided by statute, to receive the names and phone numbers of the previous foster parents if the previous foster parents authorize such release;

As previously mentioned, a lack of child information was a common theme in these interviews. No foster parent, however, specifically mentioned information regarding previous placements. It may be that this information is commonly made available (and therefore not frustrating enough to surface in these interviews) or the information is not of concern to the foster parents represented here.

(12)The provision of a clear, written explanation of the placement agency's plan concerning the placement of a child in the foster parent's home and to receive at any time during the placement any additional or necessary information that is relevant to the case of the child, including any subsequent revisions to the case plan on a timely basis;

As previously discussed, a lack of communication with workers and other DHS staff was a major source of frustration for all respondents. One foster mother explained, “It’s like we are left out of the loop.”

(13)(A)Meaningful participation in the development of the case plan for the child in foster care in his or her home.

(B)To accomplish this goal, the foster parents shall have:

(i)The opportunity to discuss the plan of the child in foster care with the case manager and the child welfare team and be provided with a written copy of the individual service and treatment plan concerning the child in foster care in the foster parent's home, as well as a reasonable notification of any changes to that plan;

(ii)The opportunity to participate in the planning of visitation with the child in foster care and his or her birth family;

(iii)The opportunity to participate in the case planning and decision-making process with the Division of Children and Family Services/Child Placement Agency regarding the child in foster care;

(iv)The opportunity to provide input concerning the plan of care for the child and to have that input considered by the Division of Children and Family Services/Child Placement Agency;

(v)The opportunity to communicate for the purpose of participating in the case planning for the child in foster care with other professionals who work with the child in foster care within the context of the professional team, including without limitation therapists, physicians, and teachers;

(vi)The opportunity to be notified of all scheduled meetings and staffings concerning the child in foster care in order to actively participate in the case planning and decision-making process regarding the child in foster care, including individual service planning meetings, administrative case reviews, multidisciplinary staffings, and individual educational planning meetings;

(vii)The opportunity to be given, in a timely and consistent manner, any information a case worker has regarding the child in foster care and the family of the child in foster care that is pertinent to the care and needs of the child in foster care and to the making of a permanency plan for the child in foster care; and

(viii)The opportunity to be given reasonable explanatory written notice of any changes in a case plan for the child in foster care, plans to terminate the placement of the child with the foster parent within fourteen (14) days, and the reasons for the change or termination in placement except in an immediate response to a child maltreatment investigation involving the foster home. The notice shall be waived only as provided for by law;

Discussed previously, several foster parents expressed a desire to be more involved in the case staffing and planning process. A lack of control in the child welfare process appeared to be a common source of frustration for many foster parents.

(14)The opportunity to be notified in advance by the Division of Children and Family Services or the court of any hearing or review in which the case plan or permanency of the child in foster care is an issue, including periodic reviews held by the court, permanency hearings, and motions to extend custody;

Several foster parents in this study mentioned how much they appreciated the ability to attend court hearings for the children in their care. One respondent said, “We are at every staffing, every court hearing.” No foster parents mentioned that they had missed notification of court dates.

(15)The opportunity to be notified and to be heard during any court proceeding regarding the child in foster care in the foster parent's home and to be informed of decisions made by the courts or the child welfare agency concerning the child in foster care;

Roughly half of the foster parents interviewed felt that they had little voice in the court process. One explained...

“If I were to say one thing as far as an issue or problem or complaint, it would be that you have no representation. If you go to court, the caseworkers have their attorney that the state provides; the children have been appointed an attorney and most of the time the parents have a state-appointed attorney. Everybody has state representation, except for the foster parents. And if anything is said about you, if you don’t happen to have something documented, you were just kind of on your own. So that would be my only complaint. It seems like everybody there has legal representation that is provided for them except for the foster parents.”

(16)The opportunity to be considered as a permanency option for a foster child in their home and if in the best interest of the foster child, and to receive assistance in dealing with family loss and separation when a child in foster care leaves the foster parent's home;

As discussed earlier, several foster parents felt that the importance of their role in the child's life was overlooked. Some felt that there was little respect for the bond developed between foster parent and child when it was time for reunification or a change in placement. One mother explained...

"The first thing you do when you separate a child from their actual parents is you set up a visit. When you take a child out of their [foster] home that has been there three or four years...why wouldn't you make sure that they have some transitional visits?"

(17)The following considerations:

(A)Consideration when appropriate, as a preferential placement option when a child in foster care who was formerly placed with the foster parents has reentered the foster care system;

(B) Consideration for adoption when a child in foster care who has been placed in the foster home for a period of at least twelve (12) months becomes eligible for adoption to the extent it is in the best interest of the child in foster care; and

(C)To maintain contact with the child in foster care after the child leaves the foster home, unless the child in foster care, a birth parent, the Division of Children and Family Services who retains custody of the child in foster care, or other foster or adoptive parent refuses such contact;

Several respondents in this study specifically mentioned that they had reversed a decision to quit foster parenting when the opportunity arose to take a child previously in their care. One stated, "To be very honest, if it wasn't for the chance that we might have gotten **** back, we would have probably already quit." Another said...

"We actually did quit once, but it only lasted for five days...Our four year old, she went home and we decided we were going to get out of it because we'd had her for two years. We were very heartbroken and then she came back into care."

No foster parents in this study mentioned that they had been denied the right to be considered as a potential placement for a child previously in their care. This may mean that the right is consistently provided, or that foster parents are not always aware of children reentering care.

(18)A reasonable plan for relief from the role of foster parenting through the use of respite care services;

Several participants stated that they wished respite was more widely available. One foster mother explained that after requesting respite, it was never provided to her. She said...

"Every so often it would be nice if we had that respite, if we can have that covered. It used to be that we could have them keep our kids and let them stay for the weekend and we didn't have to worry about them if we took

off that week....But, they cut out respite care and I don't know why because it was really something to help foster parents....We had ****'s sister, who had brain cancer in Arizona, and we were to go out there and we told them [DHS] a week or two ahead of time that we were going to go out there and we would need to get somebody to take care of our kids. We waited until a couple of days before we were going to leave and they didn't get anybody."

Another foster mother explained that even when respite was available, she felt guilty using it. "Burnout is the biggest issue. You can get respite care, but I hardly ever use it. I did some. But again, I just knew that I was burdening another foster parent." A third dedicated parent worried about quality and consistency of care when taking respite.

"I left under an emergency situation, I had to be hauled off in an ambulance, but I put off this surgery from May until six weeks ago [roughly August] because I didn't want those kids just uprooted, and I know what they go through to have to be put with another, strangers. Everybody's household has different rules and it's just not good to do that. So, foster parents make their share of sacrifice too."

(19)Receipt of timely and adequate financial reimbursement according to the agreement between the foster parents and the Division of Children and Family Services/Child Placement Agency;

Most foster parents interviewed were satisfied with the amount of financial reimbursement they received (roughly \$400 per month, per child). Two even worried that a higher subsidy might attract financially motivated foster parents. One explained...

"My idea is this, if they [reimbursements] get too high, you get the wrong people. Now, I got a lot of bad stares at a meeting one time because, if you've ever been divorced you're not going to get \$400 a child. So, sit down and shut up. I said that at a [foster parent] conference, because if you're divorced and have two children, few men are going to cop over, and their lawyer is not going to make them cop over \$800."

Still, all participants admitted that the subsidy was insufficient to cover the needs of a foster child and that they routinely paid out of pocket for expenses. One foster father believed that subsidy levels had not increased for "ten years at least." Another father stated...

"I think it [the subsidy] was never an issue for us. I mean, you do spend a lot of your own money. You spend a lot of your own money. I mean, it was for the child's sake, to take care of his needs. But, you know, it was just never enough."

A third explained, "It's [the reimbursement rate] not enough. When you consider to keep a prisoner in prison runs \$30 a day."

A more common complaint among the foster parents interviewed here was the difficulty of getting reimbursed for clothing, when children were first placed in care. One explained, "Whenever they first bring them in, they got like a suit case and a little black bag. We've got to run right out and buy their clothes, see." Another said...

"Sometimes, when the kids come and they don't have clothes or things like that, sometimes it's difficult to get clothing for them. That's changed

too. When I first started [20 years earlier], a kid came to your home and automatically got a clothing voucher...If not then, then soon after. But now it's kind of hard to get it."

(20)Receipt of evaluation and feedback on his or her role as a foster parent;

No foster parent in this study mentioned the availability of feedback for his or her performance. Again, this may be because it is not a matter of critical importance to foster parents or it is already consistently provided.

(21)In the event of an alleged violation of policies, foster parents shall have the opportunity:

(A)To request and receive a fair and impartial review regarding decisions that affect approval and retention or placement of a foster child in the foster parent's home;

(B)To be provided a fair, timely, and impartial investigation of complaints concerning the operation of the foster home;

(C)To an explanation of a corrective action plan or policy violation relating to foster parents;

(D)To have child maltreatment allegations investigated in accordance with the Arkansas Child Maltreatment Act, § 12-12-501 et seq., and any removal of a child in foster care shall be pursuant to the Division of Children and Family Services policies and procedures; and

(E)To request and receive a review of decisions that affect approval of the foster home; and

As previously discussed, several foster parents in this study were concerned about being falsely accused of child abuse. Many foster parents felt that when allegations were made, their rights were often overlooked. The few respondents who had some understanding of their rights in the child welfare process felt uncomfortable exercising them. For example, "I know that I do [have rights] but exercising those rights and knowing when it's okay to say something is difficult."

(22)Information on policies and procedures for reporting of misconduct by Division of Children and Family Services employees, service providers, or contractors, confidential handling of the reports, and investigation of the reports.

Several foster parents mentioned that DHS was often unresponsive to complaints. One stated, "I tried to speak up and say listen, here's what we're seeing. We were made to look like the bad guys. There were four people in there; three of them were against me." Another said...

"When we get one [caseworker] that's not doing their job, you don't know if it's the smart thing to do to try to turn them in or not, if they're going to pile on you if you do. You don't know."

Finally, some respondents felt that their concerns about other foster parents went unheard. One reported, "We had a situation with a little boy. He got moved and I knew that he was

sleeping in the foster parents' bed, which is not allowed. I told about it and they didn't do anything about it."

Discussion

Limitations

For this study, I chose to ask experienced foster parents about their broader satisfaction with the Arkansas Department of Human Services and their knowledge of the Foster Parent Support Act of 2007. My intention had been to also ask respondents about their satisfaction with the act and its subsequent implementation. However, I quickly discovered that foster parents were mostly unaware of the act. Interviews, then, largely consisted of a semi-structured discussion of satisfaction, concerns and visions for system improvement. Each discussion wrapped up shortly after participants admitted their lack of awareness of the act, which was one of the final questions in the interview guide.

In using this information as an analysis of the Foster Parent Support Act, there were components of the act that were not addressed in these interviews. It is therefore ambiguous if these unmentioned sections of the act were being adequately implemented, and therefore not of great concern to participants, or if these sections were superfluous to the goal of supporting foster parents. Still, the choice to allow more flexibility in the discussion was congruent with the qualitative and constructivist aims of this research. If interviews had focused on the specific stipulations of the bill, I might have missed issues of importance for these respondents.

Further, regardless of the respondents' awareness of the policy, *per se*, a discussion of their overall satisfaction with the support they are currently receiving proved to be an effective, alternative means of evaluating the Foster Parent Support Act. While these sixteen participants reported generally positive relationships with their caseworkers, there were multiple areas in which the foster parents felt unsupported; many of which correspond with rights guaranteed by the act. In this way, I was able to discover elements of the act which have not been fully implemented.

Theoretical Triangulation

The findings of this study are highly consistent with previous research. The most common complaints of the foster parents were poor communication with workers, a lack of agency support (financial, legal, training and respite), difficult child behaviors and the emotional burden of having little "say" in the child welfare process. These themes closely mirror the National Survey of Current and Former Foster Parents, conducted in 1993, which was discussed earlier in this paper (Christian, 2002). Further, these findings are similar to those of Brown and Calder (2000), who discovered that successful foster parents require positive working relationships with caseworkers. As mentioned, most participants in this study were frustrated by inconsistent communication with their workers, but highly valued the relationships formed in their years of service. When asked about their favorite aspect of working with DHS, a common response was "the people." Personal connections with agency staff, other foster parents and foster children were universally valued among respondents.

Theoretical Implications

These findings underscore the important connection between placement stability and child attachment (Fernandez, 2009). However, the symbolism of “support” (Blumer, 1969) appears to differ between the original crafters and final benefactors of the Foster Parent Support Act. For foster parents, the provision of protected rights appears to mean less than the presence of social collaboration.

Implementation and Goal Complexity

Often, analyses of human service organizations and programs rely on a single-minded focus on outcome data, in other words, how many foster parents were retained? These types of evaluations fail to notice the nearly infinite variables affecting implementation, which ultimately affect a policy’s impact. Were the proper resources devoted to the policy’s implementation, for example? Within the arena of implementation analysis, the issue of goal congruence has arisen as an often overlooked, but critical element. “Most studies of the internal operation of complex organizations, if they mention goals at all, have taken official statements of goals at face value” (Perrow, 1961, p. 854). It might be falsely assumed by evaluators, for example, that all employees (at all levels) and all relevant policies share a single-minded goal of supporting and retaining foster parents. This seems unlikely.

Organizations in which the clientele is largely involuntary such as in child welfare services, may produce a special challenge to achieving goal congruence (Perrow, 1961). Services such as juvenile justice and child welfare can often be perceived by administrators and politicians alike as a “necessary evil” (Perrow, 1961, p. 863), in which altruistic goals such as improving family functioning may be given more ‘lip service’ than actual dedication. Management of illegal activity may become the *de facto* goal in such a situation. Mazmanian and Sabatier (1983) agree that the degree of goal clarity is a critical element to effective policy implementation.

Human service agencies can easily be described as complex arenas for achieving goals (Meyers et al., 2001). As discussed here, foster parent retention has been tied to many factors. Even evidenced-based methods, such as professional foster parenting, are controversial (Christian, 2002). Goals to improve the professionalism of foster parents are tempered by simultaneous fears of a non-altruistic fostering community. Goals of protecting foster parents from false allegations are still careful not to cover actual abuse. Further, while we value giving foster parents a “say” in the lives of children, it is important not to let their voices outweigh those of the child’s birth parents. Goal congruence issues can arise when state child welfare agencies seek to better support foster parents, while criminal justice systems seek to uncover abuses in foster care.

Myers et al. (2001) state that, “organizational issues are often exacerbated because, for various political reasons, elected officials are predisposed to providing vague or ambiguous policy directives” (p. 166). Not only do politicians often convey “vague” policy goals, but legislative goals may often be very different from the day-to-day realities of street-level bureaucrats. How does one, for example, investigate allegations of abuse or neglect, while protecting the privacy of foster parents? Meyers’ thesis is that policy goals are most likely to be successful when goals are both clearly communicated and relatively simple. Further, creating measurable outcomes allows front line workers, administrators and politicians to share a clear understanding of a policy’s success or failure.

In an essay outlining the role of social welfare administrators, Patti (1985) emphasizes the importance of goal clarity. Too often, administrators focus on unimportant measures of performance. These often include output data, fundraising efforts, employee satisfaction, and the degree of change achieved. While these are all important goals, they are often not possible to achieve simultaneously in the complex arena of human service delivery. With true goal clarity, Patti (1985) says, an administrator discovers that “the real business of social welfare is to change people and social conditions” (p. 13).

Ultimately, it is hoped that the achievement of goal clarity will improve service outcomes for children, families and foster families. Indeed, this appears to be the case. Mi Cho (2007) conducted a review of 24 human service agency evaluations. The author sought out specific variables that made an organization more successful than others. She discovered five factors common among thriving organizations, goal congruence chief among them.

The lack of a foster parent database makes it almost impossible to create goal clarity under the Foster Parent Support Act of 2007. The act requires increased supports with the ultimate intention of improving retention. However, there are no measures in place for either the incidence of supports or the rates of foster parent attrition. According to Meyers et al. (2001), it is very difficult to implement a policy successfully without this type of clarity.

Conversely, because the drafting of the Foster Parent Support Act included foster parents themselves, it appears to embrace a certain degree of goal congruity. The most common reasons for poor retention (lack of voice, lack of support) (Christian, 2002) appear to be encapsulated in the act. Whether these supports are actually being fully implemented seems to be unclear, based on upon the feedback of foster parents in this study.

Intentionally vague policies can diminish goal clarity (Meyers et al., 2001). It appears, based on this study’s findings that ambiguous directives in the Foster Parent Support Act have led to poor implementation. For example, foster parents discussed the insufficiency of training to prepare them for the challenges they encounter. The act guarantees foster parents the right to pre-service and ongoing training, but does not stipulate the types and methods of training which might facilitate better preparation.

Next, the act describes that foster parents are entitled to “twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week” assistance. According to participant narratives, this is not happening. Instead, foster parents are waiting days for a returned phone call. This does not appear to be the fault of caseworkers themselves, but is often due to high casework loads. Arkansas caseworkers have an average of 25 children to serve, which is approximately ten more than ideal (Hamilton, 2011). Budgetary goals, set by the state legislature, appear to be in conflict with support and retention goals.

Similarly, because the foster care system is strained, a foster parent’s guaranteed right to decline a potential placement is compromised. Ultimately, foster parents do have the right of refusal. But, as found here, foster parents are often not given complete child histories. In addition, the urgency of placement appears to override a foster parent’s right to full information.

Further, intentionally vague legislation has hampered a foster parent’s right to “adequate financial reimbursement” (“Foster Parent Support Act,” 2007). However, the act does not specify dollar amounts. Departments are left to squeeze foster parent reimbursements out of their already strained budgets. Foster parents are routinely paying out-of-pocket for child expenses. Once again, budgetary goals appear to be in conflict with retention goals.

Finally, it is important to discuss child outcomes as the ultimate measure of a state foster care system. These are the “real measures” needed to create goal clarity (Patti, 1985). In fiscal year 2006, Arkansas foster children waited 17.48 months to be adopted (USDHHS, 2008). The

national average is 14.5 months. In comparison, Arkansas appears to be lagging in recruitment and retention of adoptive homes. However, only 25 percent of children waiting to be adopted in Arkansas are African American (ARDHHS, 2008), compared to 32 percent nationally (USDHHS, 2008).

Policy Recommendations

Several participants mentioned the desire for more connections with other foster parents and some specifically desired a mentoring program. For those times when caseworker input is required, an increased use of email communication could improve response time (Lutz & Agosti, 2005). These strategies could be introduced in one or two counties initially to evaluate their usefulness prior to state-wide implementation. Implementing exit interviews with closing foster homes (e.g. asking "What is the primary reason for closure?") could provide an effective means of long-term implementation evaluation.

This study reveals multiple lessons for future policy advocates. First, these results refute a common stereotype that foster parents primarily assume their roles for financial gain. In fact, most foster parents interviewed tend to use their own earnings to help provide for foster children in their care. Based on findings, it seems as though future policy initiatives that provide the social support that foster parents value and need would be more valuable than increased reimbursements. In addition, informing all foster parents (via email when applicable) of public input opportunities for new legislation or regulation could improve goal clarity. Compiling a listserv of foster parent contacts throughout the state would provide an easily maintained channel of communication in such times. This type of listserv could also be used to inform foster parents of new legislation such as the Foster Parent Support Act, as this study indicates that there currently exists little dissemination of such information.

Future Research

Several interesting questions arise from this study's findings. If foster parents are unaware of the Foster Parent Support Act, are caseworkers also unaware? Would small changes, such as mentoring and the use of email, increase foster parent satisfaction? Most importantly, is foster parent well-being correlated to foster child well-being? Each of these represents an important future research inquiry.

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Appendix A

Foster Parent Interview Guide

Identification _____

Interviewer _____

Date of Interview _____

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

RECORD GENDER AS OBSERVED

1. Male
2. Female
2. What is your age in years? _____
3. How would you describe yourself in terms of race or ethnicity?
 1. Black/African American
 2. White/Caucasian
 3. Hispanic/Latino/Latina
 4. Asian/Asian American
 5. Native American or American Indian
 6. Other _____
4. Marital status:
 1. Married
 2. Divorced
 3. Widowed
 4. Separated
 5. Single
5. How many people currently live in your household, counting all adults and children who stay with you most of the time, including yourself?

Total in Household _____
6. How many of the people who live in your household are adults? (18 years or older)

Total Adults _____
7. How many of the people who live in your household are 17 years or younger?

Total Children _____

8. How many of the children in your home are foster children

Total Foster Children _____

9. Please describe your current employment situation from the list below:

1. Employed part-time
2. Employed full-time
3. Currently seeking employment
4. Unemployed/Retired, not seeking employment
5. Other _____

10. Looking back over all of your foster parenting experiences, what is the total number of years and months you have been a foster parent?

_____ years _____ months

11. Have you ever been a foster parent in another state?

1. Yes
2. No

12. Approximately how many foster children have you cared for?

II. Semi-structured Questions

- A) Would you tell me what influenced your decision to be a foster parent?
- B) Have you adopted any of your foster care children?
 - If so, what factors influenced your decision to adopt?
- C) Will you tell me a little bit about your experience as a foster parent? For example,
 - What aspects of foster parenting do you enjoy?
 - What aspects about being a foster parent do you not enjoy?
- D) Would you describe for me the process or steps you went through to become a foster parent in Arkansas?
- E) Would you tell me what aspects about working with DCFS that you enjoy?
- F) What aspects about working with DCFS do you not enjoy?
- G) Have you ever considered quitting? What led you to consider quitting?
- H) Will you tell me about some of your other roles in life?
- I) Would you describe for me how you manage to balance your role as foster parent with your other roles and responsibilities?
- J) Would you talk a bit about what you believe are your rights as a foster parent?
- K) In what ways do you feel supported by the foster care system in your role as a foster parent?
- L) In what ways do you feel that you are not supported by the foster care system in your role as a foster parent?
- M) What do you think about the foster parent subsidy you receive?
- N) What do you think about DCFS overall?
- O) What changes would you like to see implemented to support foster parents in Arkansas?

- P) What changes do you think would help foster parents in Arkansas feel supported?
- Q) What policy initiatives do you think would help increase foster care parent retention in Arkansas?
- R) Have you heard of the Arkansas Foster Parent Support Act?
- If so, how did you learn about the policy?
 - What do you know about the policy?
 - Would you describe the changes you have noticed since it passed in 2007?
 - If you have noticed changes, what are your thoughts about them?
 - In what ways do you think this bill has affected your experience as a foster parent?