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Walden University
2019

Abstract

The Relation of Court Appointed Special Advocate Education to Foster Care Outcomes

by

Leah York

MA, Northcentral University, 2015

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Clinical Psychology

Walden University

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Abstract

The Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) program is an organization that utilizes lay volunteers as advocates for children in foster care to improve outcomes for those children. The effectiveness of CASAs in achieving permanency outcomes for children in foster care has been established; however, the literature has significant methodological flaws and is outdated. The purpose of this study, guided by the theory of change and social cognitive theory, was to explore whether CASA self-efficacy, through a proxy measure of education level, is related to permanency outcomes such as reunification with parents and rate of reentry to the foster care system for children in foster care. Archived data from a CASA database in the northwestern United States were examined using non-parametric statistics. The data included 138 cases, who were served by 78 CASA volunteers. The education of the CASA volunteers was used as the independent variable: 10 had a high school diploma, 23 had some college, and 45 were college graduates. Chi-square analyses indicated there was no significant relation between the education level of CASA volunteers and permanency outcomes in the individual cases, and also there was no significant relation between the education level of CASA volunteers and reentry rates of child protection cases on which they have served. The research contributed to social change by increasing awareness of the role the CASA program plays in the lives of children and their families involved in the child welfare system and highlighting the need for current research, as well as establishing educational level may not be an important factor in the outcomes of CASA cases. Suggested areas for future research include a direct examination of the relation of self-efficacy of CASA volunteers about permanency outcomes and reentry rates with a larger, more generalizable population.

The Relation of Court Appointed Special Advocate Education to Foster Care Outcomes

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

In 1977, Judge David Soukup recognized a need for advocacy for abused and neglected children and developed the idea of citizens from the community volunteering to advocate (National CASA Association, n.d.). Under his leadership, the National Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) program was established in 1982 and was managed by a board of volunteers (National CASA Association, 2007). The CASA program is a volunteer-based organization that supports and promotes court-appointed volunteer advocacy for abused and neglected children in the United States (National CASA Association, n.d.). In coordination with state and local programs, the mission of the CASA Program is to provide every abused and neglected child in the United States with a CASA to ensure that these children are safe, have a permanent home, and have an opportunity to thrive (National CASA Association, n.d.). There are 1,000 CASA programs in 49 states (National CASA Association, n.d.). The CASA Program is the only volunteer program that allows individuals to serve in the official capacity of officers of the court (Lewis, 2011).

Factors leading to the placement of children in foster care include various forms of abuse and/or neglect (Berlin, Appleyard, & Dodge, 2011). If children are removed from their home due to abuse or neglect, child welfare services, including the Department of Health and Welfare, CASA, the courts, and law enforcement work together to protect the health, safety, and well-being of children and their family (Idaho Department of Health and Welfare, n.d.; National CASA Association, n.d.). If there is a local CASA program, and an advocate available to advocate for the children involved in the case, the

most severe cases of child abuse and/or neglect are appointed a CASA (National CASA Association, n.d.).

Judges presiding over child protection cases typically appoint CASAs to the most severe cases of child maltreatment. (Barker, 2006). CASAs advocate for children in foster care for the duration of child protection cases and serve as the eyes and ears of the judge to ensure the children's needs are being met and recommendations and treatment mandates are being followed (Dziuba-Leatherman & Dolan, 1994). The requirements to become a CASA include passing a background check, completing an application, providing references, participating in an interview, being 21 years of age or older, having a high school diploma or a graduate equivalency degree, committing to serving a case until it is closed, and completing 30 hours of pre-service training provided by the local CASA agency through which the volunteer serves (National CASA Association, n.d.). There are no education requirements other than having a high school diploma or a graduate equivalency degree in order to volunteer for the program. The National CASA Program requires volunteers to complete 12 hours of continuing education training every year that they are actively serving cases (National CASA Association, n.d.). This policy is implemented at a local level and the discretion of the local program director.

Litzelfelner and Petr (1997) stated that there is controversy in the social work field regarding the training and education of volunteer CASAs. The authors explain that the level of training and preparation of CASAs presents questions regarding whether nonprofessionals can legitimately advise the court on the best interests of children in foster care who have experienced and/or witnessed traumatic events (Litzelfelner & Petr, 1997). Litzelfelner and Petr stated that CASAs should know family systems, childhood

development, substance abuse, and mental health in order to understand what the children they serve have experienced and what interventions should be recommended to them and their families. Huber and Kuncel (2016) supported the position that CASAs need further education, indicating that college-level education improves critical thinking skills. Critical thinking is viewed as an important component of medium and high-complexity jobs (Petersen et al., 1997 as cited by Huber & Kuncel, 2016). The nature of CASA work is complex as it directly relates to the well-being of children and their families who have entered the child welfare system. Whether or not the educational achievement of the CASA impacts how they work or the outcomes of the cases they work on is unknown. Given that there is longstanding concern about the minimum education requirements in the CASA program (Litzefelner & Petr, 1997) as well as the fact that the work of these individuals significantly impacts the lives of tens of thousands of children, research addressing the relation of CASA education level to permanency outcomes in child welfare cases is needed.

Information regarding the relation between education level and permanency outcomes (such as reunification with parents, guardianship, adoption, or aging out of foster care, and rate of reentry into the child welfare system after the case has been closed) may help guide requirements for CASA volunteers as well as influence current volunteers regarding their own educational goals. Any information that aids in the development of guidelines to help ensure the preparation of CASA volunteers may benefit the children and the families who are in the child welfare system, which in turn may reduce the number of cases in the system and benefit society.

In this chapter, I will review the research that has been conducted regarding the CASA program and permanency outcomes and identify the gap in the literature that my research seeks to fill. I will also discuss why this research is needed. I will identify the problem statement and summarize evidence supporting the relevance and significance of my identified problem to the field of psychology. I will specify the purpose and intention of the study and identify the study's variables. The research questions and hypotheses will be stated, and I will discuss the independent and dependent variables as well as how they will be measured. I will explain the theoretical framework that supports my research and describes the nature of my study regarding the study design and methodology. Definitions of key terms will be provided. Assumptions, the scope of the study, delimitations, and limitations will be identified and clarified. This chapter will conclude by identifying the significance of the study to the field of psychology and a summary of the main points.

Background

Permanency outcomes refer to the final placement of foster children when a child protection case is closed. Permanency may be adoption, reunification with parents, aging out, or guardianship. There has been some research on the CASA program regarding program efficacy in relation to permanency outcomes (e.g., Abramson, 1991; Caliber Associates, 2004; Lawson, Maynard, & Berrick, 2015; Litzelfelner, 2000; Pilkay & Lee, 2015), efficacy of lay volunteers in comparison to attorneys and law students (e.g., Poetner & Press, 1990), and cost-effectiveness of utilizing volunteer advocates (e.g., Abramson, 1991). The majority of this research is over a decade old. No published studies have investigated the associations between the education of CASA volunteers and

permanency outcomes. I sought to fill this gap by exploring the relation between these variables.

Researchers have compared the outcomes of child protection cases with and without a CASA (e.g., Abramson, 1991; Caliber Associates, 2004; Poertner & Press, 1990), but found no statistically significant differences (as reviewed by Lawson, Maynard, & Berrick, 2015). Abramson's 1991 study utilized a randomized controlled experimental design. Lawson et al. (2015) conducted a review of Abramson's study and determined that the small sample size, 28 volunteers assisted families compared to 28 families who did not receive volunteer support, negatively impacted the validity of the findings. Caliber Associates (2004) found that there were no substantial differences between cases with or without a CASA regarding whether or not a case that was closed re-entered the child welfare system. Poertner and Press (1990) compared 60 CASA cases to 98 staff-attorney model (SAM) cases. The authors reported the re-entry rate of cases with a CASA as 6.7% compared to 12.2% in their comparison SAM group. These results appear to be clinically significant but were not statistically significant due to the small sample sizes.

Along with small sample sizes, selection bias was a major limitation of the studies reviewed above. In all of the previous studies, researchers compared a CASA representation group with a no-representation group (Abramson, 1991; Caliber Associates, 2004; Poertner & Press, 1990). Lawson et al. (2015) explained that cases that have CASA representation are typically more severe and complex cases, meaning that a quasi-experimental comparison of CASA to no-CASA outcomes is likely not a true comparison of equivalent groups. The only study to use random assignment to CASA and

no-CASA groups (Abramson, 1991), was criticized for having a small sample size, as discussed above. Considering the methodological limitations of such studies, it is difficult to determine if the lack of significant findings is attributable to a lack of adequate power, a lack of a difference with CASA representation, or existing differences between the represented groups of children (Lawson et al., 2015).

There is some limited research on how CASAs may impact permanency outcomes. Pilkay and Lee (2015) reported that CASA intervention was associated with permanency outcomes of foster children, but they suggested future research is needed to investigate the quality of those permanency outcomes. Quality of permanency outcomes are outcomes that are in the best interest of the children and that do not result in reentry into care.

Litzelfelner (2000) explained that there is a lack of research regarding if and how CASA volunteers impact child-related outcomes, processes, and interventions. Case processes may include court hearings, court continuances, number of placement changes, development of and changes to the case plan, and the duration of the case. Case interventions entail any services offered to families involved in child protection cases and may include psychiatric evaluations to help determine needed services, counseling services, medication management, parenting classes, child development services, vocational rehabilitation, and housing assistance. Litzelfelner suggested that future research should focus on the relation between the use of CASA volunteers and reentry rates, or the rates at which closed cases re-enter the system.

Lewis (2011) examined demographics of CASA volunteers in El Dorado, Colorado noting the educational background of the volunteers in this area and found that

35% of the volunteers indicated that they had some college education, 36% had obtained a college degree, 18% held an advanced degree such as a PhD, 7% indicated a level of education equivalent to the completion of high school or a GED, and 4% reported that they attended a technical school. Lewis suggested that future research should explore CASA volunteer self-efficacy about permanency outcomes. Self-efficacy is the belief regarding the individual's capability to organize and execute courses of action necessary to accomplish tasks or goals (Bandura, 1997 p.3 as cited by Dinther, Dochy, & Segers, 2011). Self-efficacy is positively influenced by higher education (Dinther et al., 2011). Competent behavior depends on the acquisition of knowledge and skills, and self-efficacy is a predicting and mediating factor about achievement, motivation, and learning (Dinther et al., 2011). It is possible, therefore, that the education level of CASAs, in a proxy relationship with self-efficacy, relates to the outcome of child welfare cases. I explored this possible relation in this study.

Problem Statement

The problem investigated in this study was that the relation between the education level of CASA volunteers and outcomes of child protection cases is unknown and is an important association to investigate given the important role that CASAs play in the lives of children in the foster care system. There were 427,910 kids in foster care in the United States as of September 30, 2015, representing an increase of 13,481 children compared to the same day in 2014 (The Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System [AFCARS], 2016). The unified goal of child welfare services is for children to have permanency and stability in their living situations, and to ensure that programs and interventions are effective in supporting permanency (AFCARS, 2016). According to

child and family services reviews conducted by the Children's Bureau, in 2015, 8.3% of

children in foster care re-entered the system within 12 months of case closure (AFCARS,

2016). The Department of Health and Welfare (2015) reported that in 2013, the re-entry

rate of children into foster care was 8.4% in Idaho. Placement stability for children in

foster care in Idaho was 74% compared to the goal of 82% (CFSP, 2015).

CASA volunteers work closely with children and their families who are involved

in child protection cases. These individuals are relied upon to provide recommendations

to the court that are in the best interest of the children they serve. The relation between

CASA volunteer education level and the outcomes of child protection cases has not been

explored. Given the relation between self-efficacy and education, there is a possibility

that such a relation exists and also that it influences permanency outcomes. The findings

of this study may provide information that may be used to set educational standards for

CASAs or help those who want to be CASAs obtain the skills they need to be effective in

advocating for the children they represent.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this quantitative survey study was to use archived data to explore

the relation between the education of CASA volunteers and permanency outcomes of

children in foster care as well as reentry rates in the northwestern United States.

Exploring the relation between the education of CASAs and permanency outcomes as

well as reentry rates of the children they serve has the potential to highlight strengths

and/or deficits of the CASA program model utilizing lay volunteers as child advocates.

The independent variable for this research was the education level of CASAs, and

dependent variables included permanency outcomes such as reunification with parents,

guardianship, adoption, aging out of foster care, and whether or not cases reenter into foster care within 1 year. This research could provide useful information to help in achieving child welfare's goals of improved permanency and stability of children in foster care, lower reentry rates, and the state of Idaho's goal of improving placement stability and also lowering reentry rates.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The research questions that guided my research were:

Research Question 1: Is the education level of CASA volunteers significantly related to permanency outcomes in the child protection cases on which they served?

Null Hypothesis ($H_0$1): The education level of CASA volunteers will not be significantly related to permanency outcomes as assessed by reunification with parents, aging out of foster care, adoption, or guardianship.

Alternative Hypothesis (H_a1): The education level of CASA volunteers will be significantly related to permanency outcomes as assessed by reunification with parents, aging out of foster care, adoption, or guardianship. Specifically, individuals with higher education will have higher quality permanency outcomes.

Research Question 2: Is the education level of CASA volunteers significantly related to rates of reentry back into foster care for child protection cases on which they served?

Null Hypothesis ($H_0$2): The education level of CASA volunteers will not be significantly related to rates of reentry back into foster care for child protection cases on which they served.

Alternative Hypothesis (H_a2): The education level of CASA volunteers will be significantly related to rates of reentry back into foster care for child protection cases on which they served. Specifically, individuals with higher education will have lower rates of reentry back into foster care.

Theoretical Framework for the Study

The social cognitive theory explains human behavior as a reciprocal interaction between an individual's behaviors, thoughts, and beliefs, and environmental events (Bandura, 1986, 1997 as cited by Dinther et al., 2011). Self-efficacy is defined as people's beliefs in their capability to organize and execute necessary tasks and courses of action necessary to accomplish goals (Bandura, 1997 p.3 as cited by Dinther et al., 2011). Researchers have demonstrated that self-efficacy affects the relation between behavior and the internal processes of thoughts and beliefs regarding performance, learning behavior, and exertion, and perseverance on chosen tasks (Shunk, 1995, 2003 as cited by Dinther et al., 2011).

Social cognitive theory supports the use of the independent variable, education level of CASAs, through the understanding that a CASA volunteer's ability to serve the best interests of children involved in a child protection case is determined by the interaction between their thoughts, behaviors, beliefs, and environment. Education plays a key role in shaping this interaction. The theoretical framework supporting the National CASA Program is the theory of change and outcomes framework (Delale-O'Connor & Williams, n.d.). The theory of change and outcomes framework focuses on interventions or processes that are needed to attain long-term goals (Delale-O'Connor & Williams, n.d.; Schelbe & Geiger, 2017). Long-term goals of CASAs are quality permanency

outcomes that lower the risk of reentry into foster care. By identifying long-term goals and desired outcomes, one can identify the interventions and processes needed to achieve goals and objectives and work on implementation (Schelbe & Geiger, 2017).

Social cognitive theory guided my research by aiding in my understanding of the education level of CASAs and their ability to advocate for children in foster care with the support of the training provided by the CASA program. The training provided by the CASA program consists of 30 hours of pre-service training that focuses on defining abuse and neglect and services and interventions that can be implemented to help children and their families reunify (National CASA, n.d.). I hypothesized that the ability of the CASAs to identify desired outcomes and interventions that will help children and their families achieve desired outcomes is related to their education level and by proxy their self-efficacy. Social cognitive theory supports this hypothesis and, in connection with the theory of change, relates the independent variable of education to the dependent variables of permanency outcomes.

Nature of Study

This was a quantitative study in which I used archived data to explore the relation between the independent variable of CASA education with the dependent variables of permanency outcomes for children in foster care, and foster care reentry rates of children who had a CASA. This research design enabled me to explore whether a relation existed among the variables identified in the study. Through the utilization of archived data from a CASA program in the northwestern United States, I accessed closed child protection cases and CASA volunteer and employee information. The information was contained in the CASA Manager program which is accessed via computer. I was granted access to this

information from the executive director. Selection criterion included cases that had been

closed since January 1, 2017, served by different advocates. The case files included

names of the children, their families, and the CASA volunteer. For data collection and

analysis, I created my database, which did not include identifiable information of the

children, their families, or the CASA volunteers in order to maintain confidentiality.

Cases were to be organized into equal groups according to the education level of CASA

volunteers and matched according to CASA characteristics including sex, age, and

ethnicity.

The information contained in CASA Manager included the reason the children

were taken into care, the severity of the maltreatment, the case plan created for the family

including all recommended services, treatments, and interventions, the duration of the

case, and the outcome. This system provided me with information regarding reentry into

the child welfare system. The information contained in the volunteers' files included their

application for the program, which included education level and field. All data collected

for this study were de-identified when entered into my database for analysis.

Definitions

Aging out: When a child in foster care turns 18 or graduates high school,

whichever happens first, they are emancipated from the foster care system (LawInfo,

2017).

CASA: Court Appointed Special Advocates are volunteers appointed by a judge to

watch over and advocate for abused and neglected children (National CASA Association,

2017).

Child advocate: An individual appointed by a judge to watch over and speak in the best interest of a child in foster care (National CASA Association, 2017).

Guardianship: A permanency option for children in foster care that creates a legal relationship between a child and a caregiver without having to terminate parental rights. The child can maintain family relationships while establishing a stable, permanent home (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2014).

Level of Education: Also referred to as educational attainment. Academic credentials or degrees obtained by an individual (Ng & Feldman, 2009).

Permanency Outcomes: A legally permanent, nurturing placement a child goes to in order to exit foster care. This may include reunification with family, a parent, or another relative, a legally finalized adoption, or a legal guardian (Child Welfare Information Gateway, n.d.).

Reentry rates: The rate at which children re-enter foster care after having been returned to their home due to the reoccurrence of child maltreatment where the children were placed out of the home (Jones & LaLiberte, 2010).

Reunification: The process of returning children in out-of-home placement to their family of origin (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011).

Self-efficacy: A performance-based measure of perceived capability (Zimmerman, 2000).

Assumptions

As legal court advocates in the child welfare system, CASA volunteers are expected to be honest and forthcoming with the information they provide on their applications. Therefore, I assumed that the information gathered from the volunteers'

files regarding their education level would be accurate and truthful. I also assumed that the information contained in the individual case files regarding permanency placement and re-entry rates was accurate and complete due to the legal nature of the documentation.

Scope and Delimitations

In this study, I focused on a CASA program in the northwestern United States. The CASA program is a national program with individual programs operating throughout the states. There are numerous programs that operate under the umbrella of the national CASA program, but they all operate according to their unique program structure and organization. In this study, I focused on one program within the state of Idaho, and therefore the findings of the study may not be generalizable outside the district in which the data were collected. There may be unique program operations within the district where data were collected that influenced the relation between the independent variable and the dependent variables that do not exist outside of that district.

Limitations

I conducted a quantitative study and sought to examine the relations among categorical variables. Future researchers may consider conducting a qualitative study to focus on the experiences of CASA volunteers as they relate to their education level and self-efficacy. The data that I assessed for this research were archival, which limits the variables to those that have already been recorded. I used education in this study as a proxy measure for self-efficacy; however, the association between education and self-efficacy is not strong enough to conclude that there are definite differences between groups in self-efficacy. Another delimitation is regarding reentry rates. To be consistent

with other research, I chose to look at reentry rates that occur within 12 months of the case closing (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017; LaLiberte, 2014).

Significance

Each year, more than 700,000 children in the United States experience abuse and/or neglect (National CASA Association, 2017). According to the state of Idaho Department of Health and Welfare (2017), there are currently approximately 1,350 children in foster care in the state. Foster children are a vulnerable population at increased risk of teenage pregnancy, mental health issues including emotional and behavioral disorders, incarceration, homelessness, and unemployment (Child Trends, 2015). Childhood maltreatment is a significant predictor of serious problems later in life including substance abuse problems, high-risk sexual behaviors, aggression, and violent crime, mental health issues, adult relationship problems, and intimate partner violence (Berlin et al., 2011). The research focused on investigating predictors of outcomes in this population has the potential to promote positive social change by improving foster child advocacy, creating stability improving the quality of permanency outcomes, and lowering reentry rates of children into the child welfare system and foster care.

The National CASA program is striving to expand its program so that by the year 2020, every child in foster care has a CASA (Delale-O'Connor & Williams, n.d.). In order to fulfill this mission, the CASA program has acknowledged the need to implement more evidence-based or evidence-informed practices and programs (National CASA Association, 2014). Though the National CASA Program is a membership program, every state and local program under the National program differs regarding program organization, operations, staffing, knowledge, data expertise, and funding (National

CASA Association, 2014). Efforts to assess programs and program practices are welcomed with hopes of using that information to increase program effectiveness. The findings of this research may be used to benefit the children and families served by CASA volunteers, the volunteers themselves, the court system, and society in general.

Summary

This research study was a quantitative study focused on exploring the relation between the education of CASA volunteers and permanency outcomes as well as reentry rates of the children they serve that occur within 12 months. I conducted this research to fill a gap in the literature and highlight strengths and/or deficits in the CASA program regarding utilizing lay volunteers as child advocates. This research was supported by the social cognitive theory and the theory of change and outcomes framework. Key terms have been defined. I assumed that all of the information gathered from the volunteer's files and the case files was truthful and accurate. The focus of this study was limited to a CASA Program in the northwestern United States; therefore, the research findings cannot be generalized to all CASA programs and volunteers. In chapter 2 I will review the literature that is relevant to this study and provide detail regarding the theoretical guidance for the research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The problem that I explored in this study was that the relation between the education level of CASA volunteers and outcomes of child protection cases was unknown. CASAs advocate for the best interest of children in foster care, a vulnerable population at an increased risk of homelessness, mental health issues including emotional and behavioral disorders, violent crime, incarceration, high-risk sexual behaviors, teenage pregnancy, and relationship problems during adulthood (Berlin et al., 2011; Child Trends, 2015). CASAs are typically assigned to the most severe cases of child maltreatment; yet, they are not required to have specialized education beyond their required training.

Dziuba-Leatherman and Dolan (1994) explained that in order to effectively advocate for the best interests of children who are appointed a CASA, experience, extensive knowledge, and training are needed. The authors suggested that individuals with training in psychology, child development, sociology, and family systems would be most advantageous to children in foster care who need advocacy (Dziuba-Leatherman & Dolan, 1994). Caliber Associates (2004) explained that due to the severity of the maltreatment experienced by children who are appointed a CASA, it is important for CASAs to be aware of the higher risk of negative developmental outcomes and services needed by families. Also, Litzelfelner and Petr (1997) stated that a lack of training and preparedness in CASA volunteers might limit their ability to effectively advocate for children who have experienced traumatic events. The majority of published literature in this area is dated, and much of the research on CASA efficacy is over 20 years old. No

published research to date has investigated whether or not the level of education achieved by CASAs is related to case outcome, and I sought to fill this gap.

Several researchers have studied the effectiveness of the CASA program on achieving permanency outcomes in children in foster care (e.g., Abramson, 1991; Calkins & Millar, 1999; Lawson, Maynard, & Berrick, 2015; Litzelfelner, 2000; Pilkay & Lee, 2015; Poertner & Press, 1990). Lawson et al. (2015) noted that there is a need for methodologically sound research studies to investigate the effectiveness of CASAs in permanency planning as an evidence-based intervention. The purpose of this research was to use archived data from a CASA program in the northwestern United States to explore the relation between the education of CASA volunteers and permanency outcomes of children in foster care as well as reentry rates. This investigation had the potential to provide insight to the CASA program regarding establishing volunteer criteria, screening volunteer applicants, providing training to volunteers, and highlighting any strengths and/or deficits in the program that may warrant further attention. The goal of child welfare and the CASA program is to improve permanency and the stability of the lives of children in foster care and in so doing lower rates of reentry to the foster care system. This research provided useful information to help these agencies move toward achieving this goal.

In this chapter, I will explain the literature review strategy that I used and discuss the theoretical foundation supporting this research including an explanation of the origin of the theories, my rationale for choosing these theories, and how and why these theories related to this research. I will also provide a comprehensive literature review related to

key variables identified in this research and the research questions and describe what gap I sought to fill.

Literature Search Strategy

For the literature review, I used the Walden University Library and searched the ProQuest, Sage Journals, Dissertations, and EBSCOHost databases, Google Scholar, and the National CASA Association website. I used a combination of key search terms including *CASA program, court-appointed special advocates, reentry rates of children in foster care, reentry rates in Idaho, child welfare recidivism, permanency outcomes in foster care, foster care in Idaho, education level of CASAs, education of court-appointed special advocates,* and *foster care statistics.* I conducted open timeframe searches to gather as much literature as possible with an emphasis on peer-reviewed scholarly research published in the last seven years. The combination of these research strategies produced research articles that were related to and supported the research ranging from 1 to more than 20 years old. The review identified many articles that were relatively dated in comparison to recent articles. I also referred to the references listed in studies related to this research to find additional articles.

I found one dissertation relevant to this study that identified the demographics of CASA volunteers in El Dorado, Colorado and noted the education levels of the CASA volunteers (Lewis, 2011). This dissertation focused on exploring whether a relation existed between volunteer compassion fatigue, compassion satisfaction, and duration of service in volunteer CASAs. No significant relation was identified, but the author suggested future research should explore whether a relation exists between volunteer self-efficacy and permanency outcomes.

A majority of the studies found in the search compared outcomes in groups with and without CASA representation (e.g., Abramson, 1991; Caliber Associates, 2004; Litzelfelner, 2000; Pilkay & Lee, 2015; Poertner & Press, 1990). Some of the articles were literature reviews that focused on the development of critical thinking skills and self-efficacy in higher education, the need for child representation reform, and the effectiveness of CASAs (e.g., Dinther, Dochy, & Segers, 2011; Dziuba-Leatherman & Dolan, 1994; Huber & Kuncel, 2016; Lawson et al., 2015). Most of the research listed on the National CASA Association's website under *Evidence of Effectiveness* (2017) was over a decade old. I considered many of these articles to be seminal articles due to their foundational research (e.g., Abramson, 1991; Duquette & Ramsey, 1986; Dziuba-Leatherman & Dolan, 1994; Leung, 1996; Litzelfelner, 2000; Poetner & Press, 1990; Youngclarke, Ramos, & Granger-Merkle, 2004).

Theoretical Foundation

Education Levels as Proxy Measure for Self-Efficacy

The theoretical foundation for this research included social cognitive theory and the theory of change and outcomes framework. Existing research that aligned with the research I conducted utilized self-efficacy as a variable, not education, as I did. Through the existing research, researchers have demonstrated correlating definitions between these terms. For this research, I did not have access to self-efficacy data and therefore chose to use education as a measure by proxy. The rationale for using education as a proxy for self-efficacy is described below.

The social cognitive theory was introduced by Albert Bandura (1991), who proposed that human behavior is regulated and motivated by an on-going process of self-

influence and self-efficacy. Bandura proposed that self-regulation involves the determinants and effects of one's behaviors, judgment of one's behavior about personal standards and the environment, and affective self-reaction. Self-efficacy plays a significant role in one's exercise of the personal agency regarding motivation, thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Dinther et al. (2011) summarized the understanding of social cognitive theory as it relates to human behavior as a reciprocal interaction between an individual's behaviors, thoughts and beliefs, and environmental events.

Zimmerman (2000) defined self-efficacy as a performance-based measure of perceived capability and explained that outcome expectations are positively related to self-efficacy. Researchers have demonstrated that self-efficacy affects the relation between behavior and the internal processes of thoughts and beliefs regarding predicting performance, learning behavior, exertion, perseverance, emotional reactions, and achievement on chosen tasks (Bandura, 1999). Bandura (1977a) found evidence that self-efficacious individuals worked harder, were more willing to participate and engage, persisted longer, and had fewer emotional reactions when they encountered difficulties compared to those with lower self-efficacy.

Komarraju and Nadler (2013) found that students with low-self-efficacy believed intelligence to be an innate, unchangeable trait. Students with high self-efficacy accepted challenges, gained new knowledge, outperformed other students, and worked toward achieving goals associated with higher performance and mastery. Other researchers have demonstrated that a positive relation exists between self-efficacy and level of education through effort regulation strategies such as goal setting (Bandura, 1997; Pajares, 1996; Pintrich, 1999 as cited by Zimmerman, 2000), and that self-efficacy is enhanced through

higher education by learning new information, being encouraged to attain higher goals related to knowledge acquisition, skill development, and performance (Dinther et al. 2011; Komarraju & Nadler, 2013; Zimmerman, 2000).

Level of education also referred to as educational attainment, is defined by Ng and Feldman (2009) as academic credentials or degrees obtained by an individual. Level of education is used by most organizations as an indicator of an individual's skill level, ability, or productivity (Benson, Finegold, & Mohrman, 2004). Ability is defined by an individual's power, strength, or capacity to perform a task (Hunter, 1986; Ree, Earles, & Teachout, 1994 as cited by Ng & Feldman, 2009). Ng and Feldman (2009) suggested that individuals with higher levels of education had higher intelligence including both fluid and crystallized intelligence. Fluid intelligence refers to attention, processing, remembering, and utilizing new information. Crystallized intelligence refers to general knowledge (Ng & Feldman, 2009). Knowledge refers to an individual's understanding of job duties and consists of two types: declarative and procedural knowledge (McCloy, Campbell, & Cudeck, 1994 as cited by Ng & Feldman, 2009). Declarative knowledge refers to facts, rules, and principles. Procedural knowledge refers to putting declarative knowledge into practice.

Zhang et al. (2015) studied self-efficacy in nursing students from June 2013 to April 2014. The authors administered the Self-Efficacy Scale (SES; Sherer, Maddux, Mercadante, Prentice-Dunn, Jacobs, & Rogers, 1982) and the Achievement Motivation Scale (Gjesme & Nygard, 1970) to 716 student nurses in seven Chinese hospitals. A general data scale was designed by the researchers and consisted of gender, age, education level, and place of residence. The results of the survey indicated that

significant positive relations exist between self-efficacy and level of education as well as between self-efficacy and success in work performance.

Researchers have established that significant and positive relations exist between education level and intelligence, self-efficacy, and education level, and self-efficacy and work performance (Ng & Feldman, 2009; Zhang et al., 2015). Educational attainment is also related to task performance. Ng and Feldman (2009) found support through their research that education level is positively associated with work performance in that individuals with higher education were more effective in performing work tasks. Self-efficacy refers to one's perceived capability to complete tasks and is enhanced through higher education. Zhang et al. (2015) explained that individuals with higher self-efficacy reported more success in work performance; however, the author noted that self-report on surveys regarding self-efficacy should be interpreted with caution due to the possibility of over and underreporting.

The amount of research demonstrating a direct link between self-efficacy and the level of education is not substantial. However, with the support of the existing research, utilizing education as a proxy measure for self-efficacy for the independent variable in this research was supported. Of course, this is by no means a universal association. Pursuing higher education is an individual's choice and is often linked to financial resources rather than intelligence or self-efficacy. Individuals can have high self-efficacy without pursuing higher education and obtaining a college degree. This association was used as a general guide in this research, as only archived data were available and no self-efficacy measures exist in the database. Future studies may be able to focus on more direct measures of self-efficacy. One thing that education and self-efficacy have in

common is that both of these things can be changed. If an association between higher levels of education (or, in the future, self-efficacy directly) and better outcomes as CASAs is found in the research, education (or self-efficacy training) can be provided to volunteers in the future to enhance outcomes for all of the children in the child welfare system.

Theory of Change and CASA

The National CASA program is supported by the theory of change and outcomes framework, which is not a theory as much as it is the process of implementing plans and interventions that are utilized to attain long-term goals (Delale-O'Connor & Williams, n.d.). Plans are focused on a long-term goal or outcome and then identify what conditions need to be implemented to reach that goal; these identified conditions are referred to as pre-conditions. Schelbe and Geiger (2017) explain that in order to achieve both short and long-term goals, desired outcomes need to be clear in order to identify the most appropriate and effective interventions and processes. National CASA program long-term goals include permanency, child-well-being, and placement type/stability (Delale-O'Connor & Williams, n.d.).

Delale- O'Connor, and Williams (n.d.) conducted a performance measurement review of the National CASA program to assess the program's effectiveness. The researchers recommended that the National CASA program utilize the theory of change to clearly define inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes that can be tracked and evaluated regarding performance and implementation. The researchers suggested that after the implementation of interventions has been understood, an outcome evaluation should be conducted to assess the effects of CASA programs on children's system

experiences and outcomes (Delale-O'Connor & Williams, n.d.). Outcomes refer to what occurs with a child when a child protection case is closed. If the child is nearing 18, he or she may choose to age out of foster care instead of reunification or adoption. If aging out is not an option, outcomes include reunification, adoption, or guardianship (Child Welfare Information Gateway, n.d.).

Social cognitive theory in connection with the theory of change suggests a relation between the independent variable of the education level of CASAs and the dependent variables of permanency outcomes and reentry rates. The social cognitive theory provides a rationale for predicting a relation between the education level of CASAs, their ability to advocate for children in foster care, and the achievement of quality permanency outcomes as well as reduced rates of reentry into the child welfare system. As discussed earlier in the chapter, education was used as a proxy measure for self-efficacy. The hypothesis based on social cognitive theory predicted that CASA volunteers with higher levels of education would be more likely to achieve desired quality permanency outcomes and have lower rates of reentry compared to CASA volunteers with lower levels of education.

Consistent with the theory of change, in order for the CASA program to reach the long-term goals they need to implement well-trained, competent CASAs. The CASA program currently utilizes volunteers as child advocates with the requirement that they have a high school diploma or a GED and undergo 30 hours of pre-service training provided by the CASA program. With the information gathered from this research, the CASA program may be able to utilize the theory of change to implement changes in the

process of volunteer screening requiring higher levels of education and to provide more hours of training to achieve long-term goals.

Through this research, I examined whether a relation existed between education level and CASAs long-term goals of permanency outcomes and reentry rates. The social cognitive theory predicted that a relation existed between these variables. The theory of change and outcomes framework is utilized to implement this information to improve outcomes.

Self-Efficacy and Education

Zimmerman (2000) defined self-efficacy as a performance-based measure of perceived capability. He found a predictive relationship between self-efficacy and motivation as well as learning (2000). Self-efficacy was responsive to improvements in students' learning methods involving greater self-regulation and was also predictive of achievement outcomes (Zimmerman, 2000). Individuals with higher levels of education have been demonstrated by research to have higher self-efficacy, which promotes an individual's perceived and actual capability to complete work tasks, achieve expected outcomes, persevere and work harder, participate and engage more, and experience fewer emotional reactions and difficulties related to tasks (Dinther et al., 2011; Komarraju & Nadler, 2013; Ng & Feldman, 2009; Zhang et al., 2015).

Lewis (2011) explored whether a relation existed between the length of service of CASA volunteers and psychological empowerment, compassion satisfaction, and compassion fatigue (also referred to as burnout). No significant relationship was identified. Although the level of education was collected, it was not used in the analysis. Lewis suggested future research should focus on assessing CASA volunteer self-efficacy

and suggested that it may be related to the length of volunteer service, psychological empowerment, compassion satisfaction, and compassion fatigue/burnout.

Dinther et al. (2011) conducted a literature review of thirty-nine empirical studies dated from 1993 to 2010 that focused on the role of students' self-efficacy in higher education. The authors concluded that student self-efficacy was positively influenced by higher education programs that utilized interventions based on social cognitive theory. They also concluded that enactive mastery experiences (experiences in which individuals were directly involved and were completed with master level skills) were most strongly associated with creating a strong sense of self-efficacy. Practical experiences (those that individuals were familiar with and required basic skills to complete) and length of time on tasks significantly contributed to enhanced self-efficacy.

Given the research reviewed above, there is evidence to support the use of educational attainment as a proxy measure for self-efficacy. Caution must be taken to qualify this association; however; there is by no means a clear and consistent positive association between these two variables.

Literature Review Related to Key Variables

CASA Outcomes

Several researchers have compared groups of children with a CASA to groups of children without a CASA to examine the relation of CASA volunteer involvements to permanency outcomes (e.g., Abramson, 1991; Caliber Associates, 2004; Calkins & Millar, 1999; Litzelfelner, 2000; Pilkay & Lee, 2015). Two of the earliest studies on this topic, Abramson (1991) and Calkins and Millar (1999), are considered seminal articles. Both studies indicated that children with CASA representation spent less time in care,

experienced fewer placements, and were more likely to achieve the most favorable

permanency outcome, reunification.

      Abramson (1991) conducted a study involving 56 child welfare cases consisting

of 122 children in Fresno California in 1986 and 1987. The author compared randomly

assigned cases with CASA representation (n=28) to cases without (n=28). Case

characteristics included languages other than English spoken in the home, ethnicity, and

adult education being lower than a high school diploma. Abramson found that nine

children in the CASA group were planned for reunification with their parents compared

to only four children in the non-CASA group. Three children in the CASA group were

planned for long-term foster care compared to 13 children in the comparison group.

Eleven children in the CASA group had been adopted or scheduled for adoption in

comparison to none of the children in the comparison group. The small sample size was a

limitation to this study, and despite the apparent clinical significance of the findings,

there were no statistically significant differences between the groups. Another limitation

that was noted was a lack of generalizability because CASAs are typically assigned to the

most severe cases of child maltreatment. The children in the CASA group likely suffered

more severe abuse and/or neglect than the children in the comparison group.

      Caliber Associates (2004) analyzed data collected by the National Survey of

Child and Adolescent Well-Being, with a sample of 2,831 children who were in foster

care in 100 different sites across the United States between October 1999 and December

2000. Data for this study was gathered in three waves: within a few weeks of the initial

Child Protection Services (CPS) investigation (wave one), 12 months following the initial

investigation (wave two), and at 18 months following the initial investigation (wave three).

The authors indicated that the children with a CASA volunteer were more likely than children in the comparison group to be placed in out of home care, and less likely to be reunified with their families (Caliber Associates, 2004). The researchers noted that children who are appointed a CASA are at a higher risk of severe harm, have experienced more severe levels of maltreatment, and have more extensive maltreatment histories including previous CPS referrals and investigations in comparison to those that are not assigned a CASA. Given this distinction, differences between the groups may have reflected a need for higher levels of care in the CASA group, making the groups not comparable.

Litzelfelner (2000) utilized the same type of group comparison study to explore the effectiveness of CASAs in achieving permanency outcomes for children in foster care using court data collected from 200 cases that occurred over two years. Litzelfelner's research findings were consistent with those of Caliber Associates (2004), Calkins and Millar (1999), and Abramson (1991) in that children who were appointed a CASA experienced fewer placements while in care. Litzelfelner noted that children with a CASA received more services, experienced fewer court continuances, and spent less time in care. The quality of permanency outcomes was not explored.

Pilkay and Lee (2015) explored the relation of CASA assignments to permanency outcomes of children in foster care in a rural community in Tennessee utilizing the same group comparison method. The sample consisted of 304 children involved in child welfare from 1995 to 2012. In comparison to the non-CASA group, the researchers found

that the children who were appointed a CASA were more likely to be adopted or reunified with their relatives rather than their parents. The authors clarified that reunification with parents would be the best option for children in general. However, prior research has shown that in comparison to children who achieve other permanency outcomes including adoption and guardianship, children who are reunified with their parents experience a higher incidence of behavioral problems including self-destructive behaviors, lower grades, substance use, and a higher rate of legal involvement, and dropping out of school (Taussig, Clyman, & Landsverk, 2001). The authors noted that this finding might be indicative of a preference for adoption. The stated mission of the National CASA Association (2017) is to advocate for children in foster care to be safe, have a permanent home, and an opportunity to thrive. Similar to the research review above, the generalizability of this study was a major limitation. Children who are assigned a CASA tend to be severe cases, and it may be that reunification with parents is not preferable for many of these children.

Lawson et al. (2015) conducted a literature review focused on the studies conducted by Abramson (1991), Caliber Associates (2004), and Poertner and Press (1990). The purpose was to examine the effectiveness of CASA as an intervention for improving outcomes for children in foster care. Lawson et al. noted that there were numerous methodological flaws in the reviewed research studies including selection bias, non-random sampling, and small sample sizes. Also, the authors pointed out that due to the severity of maltreatment that children who are appointed a CASA experience, children with CASAs and without CASAs are not equivalent.

Duquette and Ramsey (1986) compared outcomes in the CASA system by profession, comparing lawyers, law students, and lay-volunteers who served as child advocates on child protection cases. The authors concluded that lay volunteers were just as effective as law students and attorneys regarding achieving permanency for children in foster care; however, the law students and attorneys were found to be more effective during legal proceedings due to the knowledge of the judicial system. Education of the lay-volunteers was not a variable of interest in the research. Poertner and Press (1990) conducted a similar study as Duquette and Ramsey (1986), as they compared advocacy of children in foster care by CASA volunteers to a staff attorney model (SAM). The researchers found that children who were appointed a CASA received more services and spent less time in care than those served by SAM. The difference between children represented by a CASA and children represented by a SAM regarding receiving more services was clinically and statistically significant. The difference between the two groups and the outcome of spending less time in care was clinically but not statistically significant.

Due to the clear disparity between CASA and non-CASA cases, it is likely not beneficial to use research methods involving group comparisons, as demonstrated in the studies reviewed above. The well-being of the child needs to be considered in each case, and outcomes such as family reunification may not be desirable for all cases. CASAs need to be effective problem solvers, and an examination of what may make a CASA more effective in their duties is worthwhile.

Lack of Qualified Personnel as a Barrier to Child Advocacy

Researchers who have examined the CASA program have focused on the efficacy of lay-volunteers as child advocates compared to attorneys and law students in regard to permanency outcomes (Duquette & Ramsey, 1986; Dziuba-Leatherman & Dolan, 1994; Poertner & Press, 1990), as well as barriers to effective child advocacy, including the lack of qualified personnel (Dziuba-Leatherman & Dolan, 1994).

Dziuba-Leatherman and Dolan (1994) identified a lack of qualified and adequately trained personnel as a major barrier to effective child advocacy. Through a literature review, the authors identified barriers to child welfare representation and advocacy and concluded that CASA's volunteer model was adequate regarding training in comparison to attorneys and law students because CASA volunteers conducted their investigations instead of relying on information obtained during court processes. However, the CASA training model was not found to be adequate in preparing lay-volunteers to be effective in advocating for children who have experienced severe maltreatment.

Children who receive CASA representation typically experience more severe abuse and neglect and also have a more extensive child protection history in comparison to other children in the child welfare system (Caliber Associates, 2004). Caliber Associates (2004) stated that due to the severity of maltreatment experienced by children who are appointed a CASA, volunteers need to be aware of the higher levels of risk of negative outcomes, and that the services needed by these families are likely going to be more extensive than those required by other families in the system.

Litzelfelner and Petr (1997) determined that due to being unbound by legal statutes, CASA volunteers may be useful child advocates when needing to advocate regarding controversial issues including court processes and accomplishing tasks that are outside of social workers' and attorneys' scopes of practice. However, the authors identified a lack of training and preparedness of CASA volunteers as a hindrance in their ability to effectively advocate for children who have extensive trauma histories regarding recommending adequate services to address their needs. Focusing on training and education as tools to prepare CASA volunteers is a topic worthy of future study.

Permanency Outcomes

Permanency outcomes for children in foster care include reunification, guardianship, adoption, and aging out of foster care. Researchers have established permanency outcomes related to a foster child's well-being (Rubin, O'Reilly, Luan, & Localio, 2007). The State of Idaho Department of Health and Welfare, Division of Family and Community Services, Child and Family Services (2015-2019) presented the *Idaho 5 Year Child and Family Services Report,* which highlighted various areas of performance related to child welfare including: safety, permanency, well-being, and systemic factors related to agencies and staff. Statistics reflecting the state's progress toward achieving goals established by federal outcomes, as well as strengths and concerns related to these important areas are noted.

In 2013, CFSP (2015-2019) reported that placement stability (children have permanency and stability in the living situations they are placed in at the time of case closure) is a significant concern in Idaho. Placement stability includes permanency outcomes such as placement of siblings together (sibling placement), placement with

relatives (relative placement), a secondary permanency goal, which refers to a secondary choice for permanency placement if the primary goal is not achievable, and reunification in less than 12 months. Placement stability is an area of significant concern due to the relation between placement instability and negative outcomes for children in foster care including behavioral problems and higher rates of reentry into care (Carnochan, Rizik-Baer, & Austin, 2013; Rubin et al., 2007).

Reunification

Reunification is the primary goal in child welfare cases. However, this goal is not always possible and sometimes not desirable. The Idaho Department of Health and Welfare (n.d.) reported that reunification in Idaho occurs in approximately 72 percent of cases. In contrast, the most recent report on statistics from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting (2016) shows that only 51 percent of children in foster care achieve reunification.

The Idaho CFSP (2015-2019) identified placement stability and reunification within 12 months or less as significant concerns. According to Sciamana (2013), permanency outcomes, including reunification, that occur within less than 12 months do not necessarily assure long-term or quality placement. The author explained that numerous states that have a high rate of reunification within 12 months also have a higher rate of foster care reentry within 12 months of reunification.

Reunification may not be an option or even a desired outcome in some cases due to continued parental substance use, lack of engagement and adherence to the case plan, failure to meet safety standards, failure to obtain safe and appropriate housing, and incarceration. Sciamana (2013) explained that factors that can prohibit reunification from

occurring could also be the reason that children reenter foster care and that new issues can arise once children are reunified with their parent, parents, or primary caregiver. Also, issues that resulted in the children being brought into care may not be adequately resolved or assessed by child welfare workers, leading to a return to foster care (Sciamana, 2013).

CASAs play an important role in the assessment of permanency options. In conjunction with the Department of Health and Welfare, the CASA Program's primary goal is also reunification. However, when reunification is not an option, CASAs should make recommendations to the court regarding concerns they have in the children's current or future placement, report any concerns regarding the children to their caseworker, and note them in the court report, and make reasonable efforts to work in the children's best interests in regard to placement. This includes recommending services for the parents or caregivers to help them work toward reunification, searching for alternative placement options, and being aware of services for the children if changes in placement need to occur.

Adoption

Children in foster care are eligible for adoption once their primary caregiver terminates their parental rights. Termination of parental rights occurs through the court system and may occur if a caregiver is not engaging in or adhering to their case plan, there is continued substance abuse, the caregiver does not meet housing or safety standards, or the caregiver voluntarily terminates their rights.

Out of the 1,818 children in foster care in Idaho, there are 373 waiting to be adopted (AdoptUSkids, 2002-2018). The most recent report from AFCARS (2016)

indicated that 22% of children in foster care are adopted. Adoption is the second most frequently occurring permanency outcome for children in foster care, behind reunification, but has the longest time of duration until it occurs (Akin, 2011). Foster children waiting to be adopted can be involved in the court system for more than 24 months (Akin, 2011).

As foster children's advocates, CASAs can make suggestions regarding permanency options that are in the best interests of children. They are also able to initiate motions in court and make recommendations in their court reports to help with scheduling court hearings. This can be beneficial regarding the court process not being extended for an unreasonable time and therefore, help children achieve placement stability in a reasonable amount of time.

Guardianship

Guardianship occurs when foster children are placed with either relatives or non-relatives who are court appointed legal caregivers due to the children's parent or primary caregiver's inability to care for them. This typically involves the parent or primary caregiver being deemed financially, emotionally, or mentally ill-equipped to care for a child (Laws, 2017). This permanency option allows the child to live with a guardian without the necessity of parents or primary caregivers terminating their rights (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2014). AFCARS (2016) reported that nine percent of children in foster care achieve permanency through guardianship.

CASAs may assist the Department of Health and Welfare caseworker in searching for and contacting relatives or other options for guardianship. CASAs complete home studies and have face-to-face as well as electronic communication with all parties

involved in a child protection case. They make recommendations to the courts based on the appropriateness of the potential placement and address any related concerns. CASAs have the opportunity to hear from the child as well as an obligation to report in court the child's wishes and problems related to permanency options. This may include issues regarding living with family members and identifying potential placement options.

Aging Out

If permanency for foster children has not been achieved before them turning 18, they will "age-out" of the system or be emancipated. In 2016, more than 17,000 foster children aged out of foster care due to not achieving permanency (Children's Rights, 2018). Of the 428,000 children in foster care in 2016, 22,000 were planned to age-out of foster care without a permanent family (Children's Rights, 2018).

Aging out of foster care poses numerous potential risks and negative outcomes including: increased risk of substance abuse, homelessness, incarceration, becoming dependent on public financial assistance, not graduating high school, becoming pregnant before the age of 21, and suffering from mental illness such as Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Children's Rights, 2018; National Foster Youth Institute, 2017). This is an area where significant attention is needed to help alleviate the problems foster youth may face as they age out of the child welfare system without support.

Permanency Outcome Goals

Reunification, adoption, guardianship, and aging out of foster care were used as dependent variables in this research, as they are all used in the definition of permanency outcomes in the child welfare system, including the CASA Program and the Department of Health and Welfare. Due to the nature of child protection cases, it was hypothesized

that the level of education would play a role in the outcomes of children served by

CASAs. Exploring whether a relation exists between the level of education of CASAs

and permanency outcomes may address questions regarding the criteria individuals must

meet to become CASAs, or whether additional training should be recommended for those

without a particular level of education. This should be considered in conjunction with the

evidence that some permanency outcomes that are considered goals are at times not in the

best interest of the individual children being served by the CASAs. Children involved in

child protection cases are at risk of continued negative life experiences, and CASAs need

to make judgments and solve problems that will lead to the best outcome for each child.

Rates of Reentry

In the state of Idaho reentry is defined by children who re-enter foster care after

12 months of their case closing (Idaho Department of Health and Welfare, 2016). The

CFSP report (2015-2019) noted concerns regarding risk and safety management (children

who are at risk of removal from their homes including those involved with and not

involved with the courts). McGrath-Lone, Dearden, Haron, Nasim, and Gilbert (2017)

reported risk factors associated with reentry rates including the child's age at the time of

case closure, ethnicity, behavioral and health problems, a long time spent in care,

placement setting, and placement stability.

In 2015, Idaho's Child and Family Service Review (CFSR) data profile indicated

a statewide re-entry rate representing all children in foster care at 4.2 percent

(Administration for Children and Families, 2015). This percentage was measured by a

multi-level model that measured the state's performance about other states with similar

demographics including the number of children served, age distribution of the children,

and the state's foster care entry rate (Idaho Department of Health and Welfare, 2016). This percentage was reported reflecting all children in foster care and does not address the difference between children in foster care with and without a CASA.

In 2014, the National CASA Association (NCASAA) reported that children with a CASA are half as likely as children without a CASA to reenter foster care and 90% of these children never reenter the child welfare system. These statistics were gathered from research conducted by the Office of the Inspector General (2006), Poertner and Press (1990), and Powell and Speshock (1996). These studies are more than a decade old; however, they have not been updated, and do not accurately reflect the current status of foster care reentry rates.

Abramson (1991) conducted the earliest study that examined reentry rates of children in foster care. The author reported that cases with CASA representation appeared to be less likely to return to court after case dismissal than those without representation; however, this finding was not statistically significant. Youngclarke et al. (2004) conducted a review of articles focused on the CASA program and found that children in foster care with CASA representation are 50 percent less likely to reenter the system after their case has been closed compared to those without a CASA. There are, however, multiple methodological issues in the research that the authors reviewed, and updated research is sorely needed.

Lowering rates of reentry into foster care is a goal of child welfare services (Child Welfare Information Gateway, n.d.). Utilizing this variable as an outcome measure and exploring whether a relation exists between this variable and the education level of CASAs may assist the CASA program in highlighting any program strengths or deficits

that may contribute to the rate of reentry of children in foster care served by the program. Researchers have concluded that children with a CASA spend less time in foster care, experience fewer placements, are more likely to find a safe and permanent home, and are more likely to be adopted compared to those without a CASA (Calkins & Millar, 1999; Leung, 1996; Office of the Inspector General, 2006; Poertner & Press, 1990; Powell & Speshock, 1996; Profilet et al., 1999; Siegel et al., 2001 as cited by National CASA Association, 2017). However, all of the studies examining the evidence of the effectiveness of the CASA program is over a decade old, suffer from multiple methodological flaws, reflect clinically significant differences rather than statistically significant differences, and do not reflect the current status of the foster care system. Utilizing permanency outcomes including reunification, guardianship, adoption, and aging out as dependent variables in this research had the potential to highlight areas of strength and weakness in the CASA program that may be useful to know in working toward improving the services that CASAs provide.

Summary

The published research on the CASA program has focused on the effectiveness of CASA volunteers in achieving permanency outcomes. A majority have been organized as quasi-experimental comparison designs comparing relatively small groups of children with and without a CASA. Other researchers have explored the effectiveness of CASAs in comparison to attorneys and law students as child advocates and in achieving permanency outcomes.

The majority of this literature is over a decade old and suffers from numerous methodological flaws. These research studies serve as foundational information that

supports the need for the research and also highlight the need for current research to be conducted. Among the concerns about the current CASA program is the education and training levels of CASA volunteers regarding being able to effectively advocate for children who have extensive trauma histories.

There is a need to assess the quality of permanency outcomes and reentry rates in CASA programs. Previous researchers have not explored the relation between the education level of CASA volunteers, quality permanency outcomes, and reentry rates for children involved in child welfare cases. The social cognitive theory was used to guide the hypotheses of this research, and the theory of change assisted with implementation of the information gathered from the study to encourage positive social change in the CASA program, to help achieve their long-term goals.

I conducted this research to fill a gap in the literature regarding the relation between CASA education levels, permanency outcomes, and reentry rates. The findings may be used to implement changes that may improve advocacy in child welfare and have a positive impact on the quality of permanency outcomes and reentry rates.

In Chapter 3 I will describe and provide support for the research design and methodology used for this study. The methods used to address the research questions will be described, along with the analysis plan that was conducted.

Chapter 3: Research Methods

Introduction

The purpose of the research I conducted was to add to the existing literature by exploring the relation between the level of education of CASA volunteers, permanency outcomes, and reentry rates of children involved in child welfare cases in the northwestern United States. A majority of the existing literature that has explored the relation between CASAs and permanency outcomes is more than a decade old and suffers from numerous methodological flaws.

In this chapter, I will discuss the research design and methodology used for this research including the rationale behind using a quantitative approach to explore the relation between the variables. The variables for this study included education level of CASA volunteers, permanency outcomes such as reunification, guardianship, adoption, and aging out, and reentry rates. Sample size requirements, sampling strategy and procedures, recruitment efforts, data collection and analysis procedures, and the procedures for gaining permission to access archival data will be discussed in this chapter. I will also discuss potential threats to validity and ethical procedures.

Research Design and Rationale

The independent variable in this study was the education level of CASA volunteers. The dependent variables included permanency outcomes and reentry rates. I utilized a quantitative research design to explore whether a relation existed between the education level of CASA volunteers, permanency outcomes, and reentry rates. Existing research has examined the CASA system using both qualitative and quantitative approaches (Abramson, 1991; Akin, 2011; Caliber Associates, 2004; Calkins & Millar,

1999; Delale-O'Connor & Williams, n.d.; Lawson, Maynard, & Berrick, 2015; Lewis, 2011; Litzelfelner, 2011; Pilkay & Lee, 2015; Poertner & Press, 1990; Youngclarke, Ramos, & Merkle, 2004). However, no previous researchers to date have examined the possible relations that may exist between these variables. I utilized a quantitative research design for this research as it aligned with the focus of the study and was the most appropriate way to address the research questions. This research design allowed for a large sample size to be used for the research and has been a methodological flaw of previous studies. The quantitative design was also appropriate because the variables to be used in the study were ranked into categories that were best examined using non-parametric statistics.

Methodology

Sampling Procedures

I gathered data from organizational records of a CASA program in the northwestern United States. I was granted access to the data stored in CASA Manager that was used for the research by the executive director of a CASA program in the northwestern United States. As a previous CASA program employee with an active status, I am legally obligated to uphold the confidentiality of information gathered through the CASA Manager. I did not include myself in the data used for this research. Personal and identifiable information gathered from the CASA Manager was not downloaded to any external sources.

Organizational records are a good source of archival data for use in research purposes (Vogt, Gardner, & Haeffle, 2012). A list of active CASA volunteers who served child protection cases from January 1st, 2012 to January 1st, 2017 was generated through

the CASA Manager Program. The only selection criterion was that all cases must have been closed by January 1st, 2017 to explore one-year reentry rates, and the cases were to be selected to include equal numbers in each educational group.

Only one case per CASA volunteer was to be used in the analysis. I used G*Power (Heinrich Heine Universitat Dusseldorf, 2010-2018) to calculate a sample size for the chi-square tests that were conducted. I used two chi-square tables in the analysis: I used the first chi-square to assess whether a relation existed between the independent variable of education level of CASAs and the dependent variable of permanency outcomes, and I used the second to assess the potential relation between the independent variable of education level of CASAs and the dependent variable of reentry rates. According to the power analysis for the first chi-square, there is an 80% chance of correctly rejecting the null hypothesis of no difference between expected and observed proportions with 152 cases. In the second chi-square, there was an 80% chance of correctly rejecting the null hypothesis of no difference between the expected and observed proportions with 122 cases. An additional 10% was to be added to the sample to account for unusable data and outliers. Thus, approximately 51 to 56 cases were to be included in each group of education level (high school diploma, some college, and college graduate/postgraduate).

The list of cases was downloaded into an Excel spreadsheet, including demographic information of the CASA volunteers. I intended to select cases that would include equal size educational groups, and matched by sex, age, and ethnicity (in that order of priority) in order to create three demographically equivalent groups at each

education level. This selection process was intended to help match the cases in each group and minimize the possible effects of extraneous variables.

Procedures for Data Collection

Case related information including CASA education level, permanency outcomes, and reentry rates is stored in CASA Manager. Personal and identifiable information of families involved in these cases was not downloaded or included in the database in order to protect the confidentiality of these individuals, thus creating an anonymous data set. I downloaded data into an Excel spreadsheet and imported into SPSS for analysis. No identifying information was included in this data, and variables included a number representing the case; the CASA's education level, sex, ethnicity, and age; codes for permanency outcomes for the case; and whether or not the child experienced reentry into care. Once I had downloaded the data, it was impossible to identify who the CASA or children were.

Operationalization of Constructs

The variables included in the research questions were the education level of CASA volunteers, permanency outcomes, and reentry rates. All of these variables were categorical. The education level of CASA volunteers included three categories: high school graduate, some college, and college graduate/ postgraduate, which refers to graduate level education. Permanency outcomes included four categories: reunification, guardianship, adoption, and aging-out. I recorded reentry into two categories, yes and no, depending if cases had re-entered the child welfare system since the date of closure.

Data Analysis Plan

I examined data to determine if there were outliers or invalid categorical ranks. I compared demographic data between the three groups in order to determine if the matching strategy resulted in three equivalent groups and to describe the sample.

I utilized two chi-square tests to test the hypotheses. If significance was found at *p < .05,* a Cramer's V was planned in order to further distinguish differences between categories of the variables. Assumptions of the chi-square analysis included adequate sample size and independence of groups. The use of a large database and a power analysis was intended to help meet the first assumption: if for any reason the sample sizes fell short of what was needed for the chi-square analysis, a Fisher's exact test would be used instead. The independence of groups assumption was intended to be met by the method of case selection.

I used two research questions that guided the research:

Research Question 1: Is the education level of CASA volunteers significantly related to permanency outcomes in the child protection cases on which they served?

Null Hypothesis (H_01): The education level of CASA volunteers will not be significantly related to permanency outcomes as assessed by reunification with parents, aging out of foster care, adoption, or guardianship.

Alternative Hypothesis (H_a1): The education level of CASA volunteers will be significantly related to permanency outcomes as assessed by reunification with parents, aging out of foster care, adoption, or guardianship. Specifically, individuals with higher education will have higher quality permanency outcomes.

Research Question 2: Is the education level of CASA volunteers significantly related to rates of reentry back into foster care for child protection cases on which they served?

Null Hypothesis ($H_0$2): The education level of CASA volunteers will not be significantly related to rates of reentry back into foster care for child protection cases on which they served.

Alternative Hypothesis (H_a2): The education level of CASA volunteers will be significantly related to rates of reentry back into foster care for child protection cases on which they served. Specifically, individuals with higher education will have lower rates of reentry back into foster care.

I interpreted the results of the chi-square tests as I compared the probability values to the significance level.

Threats to Validity

The CASA program in the northwestern United States where I collected data for this research is a small, rural CASA program and is not representative of all of the CASA programs under the National CASA program. Thus, I suggested caution regarding the generalizability of the results from this study as this may present a threat to external validity. Due to the use of archived data that does not include information regarding self-efficacy, level of education was used as a proxy measure. As discussed in Chapter 2, there is some evidence to support that association. That evidence has limits, however, and there is confounding information these two concepts may present a threat to internal validity. Another potential threat to internal validity may present as there may have been

other factors that contributed to permanency outcomes and reentry rates that I did had not examined in this research.

Ethical Procedures

Permission to access archived data for the CASA program in the northwestern United States involved in this study was granted by the executive director of the program. I did not gather data until permission was granted from the Institutional Review Board at Walden University granted permission. Only archived data were used for this study; thus, participant consent was not required. The ethical protection of an individual's data gathered followed both the CASA and Walden University protocols, and no identifying information was downloaded from the CASA database. I did not download or transfer outside of the CASA Manager program, any identifiable information related to the children and their families or the CASA volunteers. I maintained the confidentiality of personal and identifiable information and did not use any of this information in the data analyses. This permitted research questions to be addressed without compromising confidentiality, and the ethical risk was low.

<div align="center">Summary</div>

I utilized a quantitative approach to analyzing archived data obtained from the CASA Manager. I described the methodology for this study as s a quantitative design that was utilized to explore whether a relation existed between the education level of CASA volunteers, permanency outcomes, and reentry rates, all of which are categorical variables. I utilized chi-square analyses to examine possible differences between education and case outcomes.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to add to the existing literature regarding the CASA program by exploring whether a relation exists between the education level of CASA volunteers, permanency outcomes, and reentry rates of child protection cases in the northwestern United States. The existing literature suffers from many methodological flaws and is more than a decade old. The gap in the literature I sought to fill with this research regarding the efficacy of CASA volunteers in achieving permanency outcomes for children in foster care had the potential to highlight strengths and weaknesses of the CASA program in order to encourage implication of any necessary changes to improve permanency outcomes.

I utilized two research questions that guided this study:

Research Question 1: Is the education level of CASA volunteers significantly related to permanency outcomes in the child protection cases on which they served?

Null Hypothesis ($H_0$1): The education level of CASA volunteers will not be significantly related to permanency outcomes as assessed by reunification with parents, aging out of foster care, adoption, or guardianship.

Alternative Hypothesis (H_a1): The education level of CASA volunteers will be significantly related to permanency outcomes as assessed by reunification with parents, aging out of foster care, adoption, or guardianship. Specifically, individuals with higher education will have higher quality permanency outcomes.

Research Question 2: Is the education level of CASA volunteers significantly related to rates of reentry back into foster care for child protection cases on which they served?

Null Hypothesis ($H_0$2): The education level of CASA volunteers will not be significantly related to rates of reentry back into foster care for child protection cases on which they served.

Alternative Hypothesis (H_a2): The education level of CASA volunteers will be significantly related to rates of reentry back into foster care for child protection cases on which they served. Specifically, individuals with higher education will have lower rates of reentry back into foster care.

In this chapter, I will discuss the processes associated with data collection including any discrepancies from the plan presented in Chapter 3, descriptive and demographic characteristics of the sample, and accuracy of sample representativeness of the overall demographic. Results of the data analyses including tables and figures detailing the descriptive statistics will also be presented.

Data Collection

I utilized archived data from a CASA program in the northwestern United States for this study. Permission to access the CASA Manager program was granted to me by the executive director of the CASA program. I generated a report detailing all child protection cases served from January 1st, 2012 to January 1st, 2017. I recorded the outcome of the case and whether the case reentered the child welfare system, as well as the education level of the volunteer and the volunteers' demographic information including gender, age, and ethnicity into an Excel spreadsheet.

The originally stated sample selection process (using only one case per CASA as stated in Chapter 3) yielded a small sample size because the majority of CASA volunteers during the specified time frame managed several cases. Out of 524 cases that were served during the specified time frame, only 78 CASAs met the criteria for inclusion for the database. Eleven additional CASAs, including myself, that served cases during the specified time frame were not included in the study due to missing information, not serving the case in completion due to leaving the program, and the close date of the case being after the specified time frame.

Up to two cases per CASA volunteer were included in the database to help account for the small sample size. The second round of data collection yielded 138 cases served by the same 78 CASA volunteers. Only one case was selected for 18 volunteers due to some of the cases served by the volunteers not meeting the specified date range criteria. Originally, as stated in Chapter 3, I was going to match cases into education groups according to the volunteers' age, sex, and ethnicity. However, I did not implement this process during data collection due to the small sample size, and the groups were not equal in size.

Demographic Characteristics

The demographic information of the CASA volunteers (*N=78)* included sex, ethnicity, age, and education level: males (*n* = 9; 11.5%), females (*n* = 69; 88.5%); Caucasian (*n* = 72; 92.3%), Hispanic (*n* = 6; 7.7%); high school (*n* = 10), some college (n = 23), and college (*n* = 45). The mean age of the CASA volunteers was 51.1 with a standard deviation (*SD = 7.3).*

I organized cases into the independent variable of education level (high school, some college, and college graduate). I compared the educational groups to determine if there were differences in the demographic variables by educational group. There were no significant differences between the groups in sex distribution (χ^2 = 4.186 [2, N = 78], p = .123), age (F [42, 78] = .708, p = .859), or ethnic group (χ^2 = 1.828 [2, N = 78], p = .401). Therefore, no demographic information needed to be accounted for in the hypothesis testing.

Results

I will present **the** demographic characteristics of the sample utilized for this study and discuss any related statistical assumptions. In order of relevance to the research questions, I will discuss the results of data analyses conducted using SPSS version 25 including demographic characteristics of the sample and two chi-square analyses. I utilized Tables to present the results of the two chi-square analyses.

Statistical Assumptions

I hypothesized that relations would exist between the education level of CASA volunteers, permanency outcomes, and reentry rates as existing literature had established the effectiveness of CASA volunteers as child advocates (Duquette and Ramsey, 1986) as well as the effectiveness of CASA volunteers in achieving permanency outcomes for children in foster care (e.g., Abramson, 1991; Caliber Associates, 2004; Litzelfelner, 2000; Pilkay and Lee, 2015; Poertner and Press, 1990).

Comparison of Permanency Outcomes by Education

I conducted chi-square analyses to explore the relation between the independent variable, education level of the CASA volunteers, and the dependent variables,

permanency outcomes and reentry rates for child protection cases in the northwestern

United States. Education level included three categories: high school, some college, and

college graduate. Permanency outcomes included five categories: reunification, adoption,

guardianship, aging-out, and others. "Other" was added due to the outcome of three cases

falling outside the original four categories including the child being moved to another

state or country. The results were not statistically significant, $\chi^2 = 6.321$ (8, N = 137), p =

.61, indicating that there was no statistical association between the education level of

CASA volunteers and permanency outcomes (see Table 1).

Table 1

Education Level & Permanency Outcomes

Education Level	Reunification	Adoption	Guardianship	Aging-Out	Other
High School	10	4	1	3	0
Some College	32	5	1	3	0
College Graduate	54	13	3	5	3
Totals (*N = 137)*	96	22	5	11	3

Comparison of Reentry Rate by Education

The second chi-square analysis explored the association between the education

level of CASA volunteers and reentry rate. Cases were scored "yes" if the child re-

entered the child-welfare system within one year of their original case being closed.

Cases scored "no" did not re-enter the system post closure. The results were not

statistically significant, $\chi^2 = 1.636$ (2, N = 137), p = .44, indicating no association

between the education level of CASA volunteers and reentry rate (see Table 2).

Table 2

Education Level and Reentry Rates

Education Level	Yes	No	Total
High School	2	16	18
Some College	3	38	41
College Graduate	8	70	78
Total (*N = 137)*	13	124	137

Summary

In this chapter, I presented the purpose of the study, research questions, and

hypotheses. In detail, I discussed data collection methods including any discrepancies. I

presented demographic information of the CASA volunteers and described

representativeness of the sample regarding the larger population. I presented the results

of the data analyses and discussed in detail in the text as well as via two tables. I

conducted data analyses via two chi-square analyses to explore whether relations existed

between the independent variable, education level of CASA volunteers, and the

dependent variables, permanency outcomes and reentry rates. The sample utilized for

data analyses consisted of 78 CASA volunteers who served 138 child protection cases in

the northwestern United States. Due to the results of existing research, I hypothesized

that relations would exist between the independent and dependent variables; however, for

both research questions regarding whether a relation existed between the independent variable, education level of CASA volunteers, and the dependent variables, permanency outcomes, and reentry rates, I did not find any associations.

In Chapter 5, I will discuss interpretations of the research findings, present limitations of the study, offer recommendations for future research and highlight implications for social change.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusion, Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore whether a relation exists between the education level of CASA volunteers, permanency outcomes, and reentry rates for child protection cases in the northwestern United States. In this quantitative study, I included archived data from a sample of 78 CASA volunteers who worked on 138 child protection cases in the northwestern United States from January 1st, 2012 to January 1st, 2017 in the analysis. I excluded eleven individuals as they either did not serve the case in its entirety, the case was still active after the specified time frame, or no demographic information was stored in the database. Due to the small sample size, I sampled two cases per CASA except for 18 CASAs, for whom one case was included. Chi-square analyses indicated that there were no statistically significant associations between the independent and dependent variables.

In this chapter, I present a discussion of the research results and the interpretation of the findings. I will note limitations of this study, highlight recommendations for future research, and present implications for positive social change.

Interpretation

In order to address the two research questions that guided this study, I utilized archived data from a CASA program in the northwestern United States. I utilized the education level as the independent variable as a proxy variable for self-efficacy. This variable has not been explored in previous research regarding the CASA program, nor have the relations between education level, permanency outcomes, and reentry rates, as discussed in the literature review in Chapter 2.

Interpretation in Context of Literature Review

Researchers have explored the outcomes of cases with and without a CASA (e.g., Abramson, 1991; Caliber Associates, 2004; Litzelfelner, 2000; Pilkay & Lee, 2015; Poertner & Press, 1990) and found clinically significant but not statistically significant associations, including that children with a CASA typically spend less time in care, experience fewer placements, are more likely to be placed in out of home care and are more likely to achieve reunification. In contrast, research conducted by Caliber Associates (2004) found that children with a CASA are less likely to be reunified with their parents than those without a CASA. Pilkay and Lee (2015) clarified that reunification is viewed as the best option for children in general, but noted that in comparison to children who achieve other permanency outcomes children who are reunified with their parents experience a higher incidence of behavioral problems including self-destructive behaviors, lower grades, substance use, and a higher rate of legal involvement and dropping out of school (Taussig, Clyman, & Landsverk, 2001). Researchers have also demonstrated the effectiveness of the CASA program on achieving permanency outcomes (e.g., Abramson, 1991; Calkins & Millar, 1999; Lawson, Maynard, & Berrick, 2015; Litzelfelner, 2000; Pilkay & Lee, 2015; Poertner & Press, 1990). The findings of Litzelfelner's research were consistent with those of Abramson (1991), Calkins and Millar (1999), and Caliber Associates (2004) regarding children with a CASA spending less time in care; however, small sample sizes have been a problem in the majority of studies. Additionally, authors have noted that children with a CASA received more services and experienced fewer court continuances. Duquette and Ramsey (1986) found that CASA volunteers were just as effective as lawyers and law students in

achieving permanency outcomes but noted that lawyers and law students were more effective during legal proceedings due to their trade.

The purpose of this research was to contribute to and expand on the literature reviewed above regarding the outcomes of CASAs about their education status. As the relations between the variables utilized in this study (education level, permanency outcomes, and reentry rates) had not been explored in previous research, I hypothesized that their utilization in this study would provide more information to understand further the effectiveness of CASAs, as well as highlight program strengths and weaknesses that could be implemented to further improve effectiveness and outcomes. The findings of this study were similar to previous studies in that the findings were negative: the educational status of the CASA appears to make no difference in the outcome of the case.

In contrast to previous studies that I discussed in the literature review, this study was not a comparison of outcomes among cases with and without a CASA; therefore, the results of this study are not directly comparable with the previous studies discussed above. Lewis (2011) explored possible relations between a new volunteer model, satisfaction, fatigue, and length of service of CASA volunteers, which also substantially differs from the purpose of this research. However, Lewis suggested future research should utilize various measures to assess perceptions of competency, specifically self-efficacy. Lewis (2011) found a correlation between competency and the work of the volunteers, but there was a lack of support for their hypotheses due to the limitation of the cross-sectional research design that was utilized as a change in volunteer perceptions and cognitions were not recorded throughout the study. Through the current study, I attempted to expand on that research by investigating the association between education

and outcome, and the findings were not significant. The lack of prospective measurement of concepts such as self-efficacy may have contributed to the lack of significant results, as the educational achievement was used as only a proxy measure for self-efficacy.

A common theme between the results of this research and the results of previous research discussed throughout the literature review is a lack of significant findings and the limitation of small sample size (Abramson, 1991; Caliber Associates, 2004; Litzelfelner, 2000; Pilkay & Lee, 2015; Poertner & Press, 1990). Due to the differences in CASA programs as well as the difference in the severity of cases that are represented by CASA volunteers compared to those without a CASA, there are implications for poor generalizability between geographical locations. It is also impossible to randomly assign cases to a CASA versus no CASA group in a prospective experimental study, as this would be unethical. CASAs are usually assigned to cases that involve more severe abuse or neglect. Thus, the research methods that can be used to investigate this topic are necessarily limited. It is possible, however, to ask CASA volunteers to complete questionnaires when they start their work in order to identify if psychological measures are associated with case outcome, and this approach is recommended for future research.

Although this was not a comparison study (e.g., Abramson, 1991; Caliber Associates, 2004; Litzelfelner, 2000; Pilkay & Lee, 2015; Poertner & Press, 1990), the results of this study are not generalizable to other CASA programs due to demographic characteristics unique to the area where archived data used for this research were derived. Due to the possible influence of numerous other factors that may contribute to permanency outcomes and reentry rates, it is also possible that limited findings from this research as well as previous research could be due to the complexity of this possible

relation. Also, some of the permanency outcomes that were used in this research as well as other studies are not necessarily desirable for every case. Although the general goal is to reunite families, there are some parents who cannot or will not comply with and complete necessary tasks on their case plans in order to reunify with their children. When establishing case plans and working with families to achieve permanency, the priority of the CASA program is "the best interest of the child" (National CASA Association, 2017). If reunification is not in the child's best interest, CASAs in coordination with the state assigned a social worker must utilize problem-solving to figure out what the best permanency option is. The problem-solving ability or critical thinking skills may be better variables to use for future studies on CASA outcome, but it should also be recognized that reunification is not always a universally desirable goal.

A majority of previous research studies utilized a comparison method of CASA versus no-CASA representation (e.g., Abramson, 1991; Caliber Associates, 2004; Litzelfelner, 2000; Pilkay and Lee, 2015; Poertner and Press, 1990) or CASA representation compared to representation by a lawyer or law student (Duquette & Ramsey, 1986). Other studies that were discussed included literature reviews of previously conducted research (Dinther et al., 2011; Lawson et al., 2015). Lewis (2011) focused on variables related to the CASA and their performance. However, similar to this research, it was determined that more variables are necessary to understand the contributing factors to outcomes of child protection cases.

Interpretation in Context of Theoretical Frameworks

The focus of the current study has been suggested in previous literature (Lewis, 2011); however, as self-efficacy was not assessed and available in the database, education

level was used due to its positive relation to self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Pajares, 1996; Pintrich, 1999 as cited by Zimmerman, 2000; Ng & Feldman, 2009; Zhang et al., 2015). Because social cognitive theory posits that human behavior is regulated and motivated by self-influence and self-efficacy, it was hypothesized that there would be a significant association between education levels and permanency outcomes. A chi-square analysis, however, did not identify a significant association between education level and permanency outcomes. Thus, the null hypothesis was not rejected for the first research question. Problems associated with using education as a proxy-measure for self-efficacy included limited research supporting the association, indirect associations between the variables established through definitions of both terms and contributing effects, and lack of universal association.

The theory of change and outcomes framework together with social cognitive theory suggests that with higher levels of education, CASAs would have an increased ability to achieve quality permanency outcomes and reduce reentry rates for child protection cases on which they served. However, a chi-square analysis of education level and reentry rates found no statistically significant association existed between the variables in the current sample. Thus, the null hypothesis cannot be rejected for either of the two research questions. The findings are not consistent with the theoretical guidance that was used for this research, but that inconsistency may be due to the use of proxy measures and small sample size. Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986, 1997) also may provide some guidance regarding the lack of significant findings: the sample included cases that all had CASA, and all CASAs had at least a high school education. It is possible that completing a high school education provides enough self-efficacy to

perform in this capacity. It is also possible that self-efficacy for the task of representing children in the child welfare system comes from experiences other than formal education. Future research may continue to use social cognitive theory as a guide; however, the use of formal measures of self-efficacy is suggested.

The theory of change and outcomes framework focuses on interventions or processes that are needed to attain long-term goals (Delale-O'Connor & Williams, n.d.; Schelbe & Geiger, 2017). Because the long-term goals of CASAs are quality permanency outcomes that lower the risk of reentry into foster care, and no relation between education and those quality outcomes were found, no changes in CASA procedures are recommended given the findings of this study. The theory of change and outcomes framework is a functional framework that uses empirical evidence to suggest changes in procedures that may help achieve goals. Because no significant associations were found in this study, there is no clear need to change the educational requirements of CASAs.

Limitations

Through this study, I examined the possible associations between the education level of CASA volunteers and permanency outcomes as well as reentry rates in a CASA program in the northwestern United States. The limitations of this study include generalizability, small sample size, limited inclusion of factors due to use or archived data, and use of education level as a proxy measure for self-efficacy. Limitations contribute to the interpretation of the findings of this study and are essential for consideration.

Generalizability was a limitation regarding the external validity of this study. The CASA program in the northwestern United States where data were gathered for this research is a small rural community and is not representative of all CASA programs. Therefore, the findings of this study should be considered in such a context.

The small sample size was a major limitation in earlier studies on the CASA program (Abramson, 1991; Caliber Associates, 2004; Pilkay & Lee, 2015; Poertner & Press, 1990). The small sample size that I utilized for this research was smaller than originally anticipated. Sample size analyses indicated a sufficient sample size for the analysis of the possible relation between education level and permanency outcomes would be approximately 156 cases. Sample size analyses regarding the possible relation between education level and reentry rates indicated 122 cases would be needed. The original inclusion criteria were one case per CASA; however, I determined that two cases per CASA would need to have a large enough sample for the analysis. Even with this expansion of the inclusion criteria, the sample size of cases included only 138 cases, which is 22% short of the planned sample size, thus severely limiting power.

Due to the use of archival data, other factors that were not included in this study such as demographic information of the child and family being served, previous child protection history, intergenerational maltreatment history, training and experience of the CASA volunteer, the training and experience of the social worker serving the case, available resources, and time spent in care may have contributed to permanency outcomes and reentry rates. These additional factors would have been useful during this study in order to understand other possible relations that may exist regarding permanency outcomes and reentry rates and the lack of incorporation is viewed as a limitation.

Another limitation of this study that should be considered is that education level was used as a proxy measure for self-efficacy; however, the association between education and self-efficacy is not strong.

Recommendations

From the data I gathered from this research, the need for more current research regarding the CASA program was prominent in order to more comprehensively understand the role of CASA volunteers as child advocates in achieving permanency and reducing reentry rates for children in foster care. The data I gathered highlighted the lack of factors that have been included in previous research that may contribute to outcomes, as well as the need to include larger samples in future research. Although this study did not identify relations between the independent variable, education level, and the dependent variables, permanency outcomes and reentry rates, the results indicate the need for more research that could be organized from both qualitative and quantitative designs. Recommendations for further understanding of various factors such as self-efficacy of CASA volunteers and exploration of possible relations that may exist between additional variables are discussed more in-depth throughout this section.

In an attempt to increase generalizability and rectify the limitation of small sample size found throughout previous research (Abramson, 1991; Caliber Associates, 2004; Pilkay and Lee, 2015; Poertner and Press, 1990) as well as in this study, future research could utilize data statewide or perhaps nationwide in order to gather a larger and more diverse sample. To further improve internal validity, future research should include other variables such as training and length of experience of the CASA, demographic information of the families involved in the cases being served, resources that were

utilized during the case to promote achievement of permanency, and type of maltreatment. An assessment of CASA volunteer self-efficacy would also be useful in future research in order to establish self-efficacy as a variable (Lewis, 2011). Conducting a qualitative study to explore volunteer perceptions of self-efficacy as well as their experiences as a CASA specifically focused on permanency outcomes and reentry rates may also provide foundational information needed to select more variables for future research.

Future researchers may also want to compare data from different state CASA programs that utilize the volunteer model and further, possibly compare a state that utilizes the volunteer model to another state that utilizes an employee-based model where volunteers are required to have obtained bachelor's degrees or higher in psychology, childhood development, social work, or a related field. Due to the findings from a study conducted by Dziuba-Leatherman and Dolan (1994) regarding lack of adequate training of CASA volunteers, these researchers and Litzelfelner and Petr (1997) highlighted the need for future research to focus on training and education of CASA volunteers due to the severe maltreatment experienced by the children served, which prompted and supported the use of the independent variable in this study, education level. Although educational level did not demonstrate an effect on permanency outcomes through this study, it is important to consider training specific to the CASA program may be key to helping children in the system; therefore, future research should focus on specialty training in addition to general education level regarding outcomes.

Implications

Implications for positive social change discovered by this study include increasing awareness of the CASA program and highlighting the need for more current research. The goal of more current research specifically to highlight program strengths and weaknesses, as well as to include more factors that may play a role in the outcomes of cases.

Increasing awareness of the important role CASAs play in the lives of children involved in the child welfare system through the perspectives of communities where volunteers are sourced, local and state program directors, national CASA program affiliates, professionals involved in the child welfare system, and researchers and practitioners involved in social sciences contributes to social change by providing updated information that may spark action and involvement from others. The relevance and importance of social issues must be brought to the attention of others before changes can be considered, researched, and implemented. By increasing awareness of the CASA program, others are provided with information that may develop into more research and policy change.

The need for future research on the CASA program to highlight program strengths and weaknesses in order to improve permanency outcomes and lower reentry rates contributes to positive social change as decisions can be made by the program director of the CASA program in the northwestern United States, which may influence changes to be implemented in other CASA programs, and possibly the National CASA program. As the national child welfare system, including the National CASA program, set goals to help improve the lives of children and their families, program strengths and weaknesses can be

considered in contemplating policy and program changes that may impact future success in attaining such goals. Through this study I did not determine existing relations between education level, permanency outcomes, and reentry rates of child protection cases in the northwestern United States, and so no clear recommendations for changes in policies or procedures can be made; however, the findings do indicate that without further study, what is needed to improve program statistics in regard to attaining overall goals is not warranted. Additionally, the results of this research indicated that the inclusion of additional variables in future research such as the previous history of maltreatment, intergenerational maltreatment, demographic information of children and their families, and volunteer self-efficacy might help clarify what factors may contribute to outcomes of child protection cases.

The focus of the current research on the CASA program as well as its implications for future study will hopefully contribute in a positive way to bring attention to the importance of the CASA program as viewed by the community where volunteers are sourced, organizers and directors of local CASA programs, and organization of the National CASA program, and generate interest and action devoted to future research. The lack of statistically significant findings in the current study may also be supported by future findings, indicating that anyone with a high school diploma may serve as a competent contributor to the CASA program. However, it is possible that this information may lead to an increase in individuals participating in the CASA program further contributing to intended improvement in the well-being of children and their families involved in the child welfare system.

Summary

Although the results of this study did not yield clinically or statistically significant results; powerful implications for social change beginning with increased awareness of the CASA program will hopefully stimulate interest and action into future research that will contribute to the betterment of the lives of children and their families. The purpose of this study was to explore whether relations exist between the education level of CASA volunteers, permanency outcomes, and reentry rates of child protection cases in the northwestern United States. The results of the study indicate that no clinically or statistically significant relations exist. However, a major limitation, small sample size, negatively impacted these findings. Other limitations including education level used as a proxy measure for self-efficacy, generalizability, and the limitation of included factors due to the use of archived data impacted the results.

Previous research focused on the CASA program that was discussed throughout this study is more than a decade old. Trends in the child welfare system have changed since current research has been conducted. Due to the significant role that CASA volunteers play in determining the outcomes of the child protection cases they serve in combination with the goals of the child-welfare system to improve permanency outcomes and reduce reentry rates, it is crucial that future research be conducted to explore possible relations between permanency outcomes, reentry rates, and other variables. Understanding factors that may contribute or be related to permanency outcomes and reentry rates do not solely impact statistics regarding the child welfare system or processes implemented by various programs but the lives and children and their families.

The findings of the present study indicate that educational level has no relation to permanency outcomes. This indicates that a high school education may be sufficient to perform the duties of an advocate for the child welfare system at a level that is indistinguishable from higher levels of education. The present study may be used to support current educational standards for the CASA program and encourage more volunteers with a high school education to participate in this program.

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