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SOCIAL WORKERS FOSTERING HIGHER EDUCATION WITHIN FOSTER YOUTH

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SOCIAL WORKERS FOSTERING HIGHER EDUCATION

WITHIN FOSTER YOUTH

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A Project

Presented to the

Faculty of

California State University,

San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master in Social Work

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by

Magally Villarreal

Danahly Contreras Reyes

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Approved by:

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ABSTRACT

The following research study examines foster youth and higher education, specifically focusing on the roles social workers do or might play in helping foster youth pursue higher education. The literature suggests that child welfare agencies have implemented programs for foster youth to be able pursue a higher education and for social workers to assist with the process, to improve foster youths' educational outcomes. However, there continues to be a gap between foster youths' aspirations and achievements.

This study uses a qualitative design, using in-depth interviews with social workers in Southern California. A snowball sampling method was used to recruit participants, including using personal connections of the researchers to identify potential social worker participants and then asking each participant to nominate an additional social worker participant. This study interviewed 10 social workers who have previously worked or are working for the child welfare system. During the interviews the researchers were asked about their assistance in providing youth with information regarding college and university programs that support foster youth, as well as their knowledge of resources to give to the foster youth students. The researchers also asked about the preparation process social workers use with youth applying for admission, financial aid, grants, and scholarships.

Upon analyzing the data, three common themes emerged from the interviews of the participants. The three common themes included barriers that

foster youth experience in their lives, such as emotional trauma that remains unresolved and finding stability in a placement home and in the relationships they form. The second theme found was the complexity of the child welfare social worker's role. The final theme that emerged from the analysis of the data is that the focus is not on education for foster youth, this involved obstacles such as a lack of mentorship for the foster youth and a knowledge of resources that is limited in social workers.

This research study examines social workers' perceptions of their roles in supporting foster youth pursue higher education. The major implications of this study are that there is not enough training to better prepare social workers to working with foster youth in helping them achieve a higher education. Another implication is that social workers defined their role in child welfare as being too impacted by the high number of cases that they carry, that they cannot take time to mentor foster youth the way they would like to. It is recommended that the state of California reanalyze their long term outcomes of foster youth if they were to have better mentoring from social workers. This could be made possible if, potentially, social workers were assigned a lower number of cases to take more time and produce a higher quality of work with each individual foster youth student. This study is significant because it may help identify improvements in social work training, education, programs, and policies in order to assist foster youth in achieving higher education.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

DEDICATION

First and foremost, I want to thank my family for all their love, support, and encouragement through the most challenging two years I have experienced. I dedicate this research to all the foster youth who are faced with adverse experiences, never let your life experiences define who you are, and always believe that you can and will achieve greatness. To all the foster youth that I had the pleasure of working with my first year of graduate school, you have all inspired me and will do great things. To my Fiancé Danny, thank you for always supporting me, for all those long nights and early mornings, you stayed up with me. You have been my rock and have always believed in me even when I didn't believe in myself.

Thank you for being such a great partner and father to Gianna. I want to thank my closest friends in the cohort for making sure that I stayed on track and didn't give up after becoming a new mommy during the program. I would also like to dedicate this to my amazing, hardworking, and selfless friend and research partner Danahly Reyes, I am so glad to have partnered up with such a motivated and committed individual.

-Magally Villarreal

First and foremost, I would like to thank my parents who gave up everything they knew to come to a foreign country, and who surpassed their struggles to provide my sister and I the best opportunities for a brighter future. I

would like to thank my grandparents, especially my grandfather who believed in me and held out hope for me even when I didn't. I would also like to thank my friends from my cohort for making this rollercoaster of the program, much more fun. Especially to my dear friend and research partner, Magally, who pushed me to do better both in school and to grow character in life, you are an incredible being and an even more wonderful mother. I would like to thank the staff of the grad program who have always been a strong support and who truly have tried to ensure that we all succeed. Finally, I would like to dedicate this project to all the foster youth students, especially the First Star cohort, who have struggled in achieving their goals in life. Remember, you are not what has happened to you. Never stop believing that you can be the best version of yourself and while the struggles you encounter might be different than others, it only makes your story that much greater when you can surpass your struggles and achieve your goals. Regardless of the odds that are stacked against you, you can achieve the "impossible", even the word itself says "I'm possible".

-Danahly Contreras Reyes

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

This study examines social workers' perceptions and experiences related to their roles in helping foster youth obtain higher education. According to Courtney and colleagues (2016), approximately 80% of foster youth reported a desire to earn a college degree, yet it is estimated that only 3-5% successfully completed an undergraduate degree. Foster youth reported being faced with educational barriers to college such as history of educational instability and lack of knowledge regarding access to services and programs (Courtney et al., 2016). There are now many programs that reach out to foster youth that identify themselves as foster youth and help appropriately transition these youth into university life. Two examples of these support programs are the Educational Opportunity Program (Renaissance Scholars) and the First Star Academy program, both of which provide guidance, financial assistance, and a support network that are available to foster youth in order for them to be successful.

Problem Statement

Foster youth may age out of the foster care system with motivation and aspiration to pursue higher education; however, they may not be adequately prepared or have sufficient resources to pursue their educational goals after high school. Foster youth are sometimes led to believe there are limited opportunities for them after graduating high school either due to insufficient funds, a lack of

confidence, or a lack of support, therefore, causing an extremely low rate of foster youth pursuing a higher education (Bruster & Coccoma, 2013). As foster youth are in the child welfare system, family and community supports are not always available to guide them through life decisions. Foster youth may also struggle to seek help due to the difficult experiences such as physical, emotional abuse, and neglect. These life experiences youth face during childhood make them vulnerable to mental health problems, homelessness, unemployment, and poverty (Salazar et al., 2016). Child welfare workers' main priority is the safety of the child; therefore, workers are mandated to prioritize securing placement for foster youth, with education taking a lower priority. By educating foster youth of the various support programs, grants, and scholarships, social workers can plant the seed and assist foster youth to increase their chance of getting an education and improving their lives (Bruster & Coccoma, 2013). This study examined social workers' roles in providing foster youth with the appropriate information to prepare them to go on to pursue higher education.

Policy Context

Recent efforts to improve foster youth access to higher education have included changes in policies. In 2018, adjustments to federal financial aid programs improved financial support for foster youth, including automated verification for foster youth and expanded eligibility for foster youth (California College Pathways, n.d.). While these efforts are important, a great number of

foster youths fail to graduate high school and enter higher education. Only 50%

of these foster youth will actually graduate high school (National Foster Youth

Institute, n.d.). From those 50%, only 20% will enroll in college courses and only

3% of those will actually graduate (First Star, n.d.). There remains a disconnect

from the number of foster youths who aim to achieve a higher education and the

number of students who actually achieve it.

A number of programs seek to help foster youth develop the skills for self-

sufficiency, while perhaps indirectly improving their ability to achieve higher

education. For example, the federal Extended Foster Care (EFC) program offers

resources to students that may help. For example, (EFC) resources include

foster care placement or supervised independent living placement (college

dorms, shared living placements, apartments), medical and dental care,

independent living program services which entail life skills, clothing, allowance,

and referrals to community resources (California Department of Social Services,

2012). However, there continues to be a lack of social support and resources

past the age limit of 21, and these students continue to require help that

increases their chances of graduating from a college or university.

Practice Context

When thinking of the challenges faced by the foster youth in pursuing

higher education, it would seem that the odds are stacked against these

individuals. One of these challenges include a lack of encouragement and

support from people around them (Bruster & Coccoma, 2013). Upon emancipation, or the exiting of the foster care system, it was often expressed by the foster youth that they often felt that they needed, and lacked, support from adults when seeking help with entering higher education programs, such as graduate schools (Bruster & Coccoma, 2013). While there are currently programs provided by the county to help foster youth into adulthood, such as the Independent Living Program (ILP), there are limitations in the support social workers can provide (California Department of Social Services, n.d.). Foster youth can only remain in ILP until the age of 21, and the issue is that foster youth require additional and ongoing support and mentorship, past this age to continue pursuing their higher education.

Purpose of the Study

Each year many children and teenagers enter the foster care system when they are removed from the custody of their parents or guardians for the sole purpose of keeping them safe from future abuse or neglect. Foster care is a temporary living arrangement for children and teens who enter the child welfare agency in which they are placed with relatives or non-relatives. Children who enter the foster care system have lived through some form of neglect, abuse, or trauma, which can affect a child's overall development and wellbeing and eventually affect their educational success. As a result of their experience, foster youth show a shockingly high school dropout rate, 50%, and low percentage pursuing a college education, 20%, with a 1% graduation rate from a college

(First Star, n.d.). This study's goal is to identify the perceptions of social workers in regard to their role in educating foster youth and encouraging them to pursue higher education.

Social workers play multiple roles in supporting the education of foster youth. This may include providing resources, and information to youth of college and university support programs, and instructions on the application and financial aid process in hopes to aid foster youth pursue higher education. Educating foster youth on the resources that are intended for youth to be successful in higher education, may be one of the most effective means to increase the rates of foster youth in higher education (Bruster & Coccoma, 2013).

Foster youth tend to have poorer educational outcomes than their non-system affiliated peers, suggesting that the problem stems from their participation in the system. Foster youth have lower grade point averages, score lower on standardized tests, have higher levels of behavioral and special education needs, and significantly lower high school graduation rates than those of the general K-12 student population (Courtney et al., 2016). Social workers have the power to educate foster youth on meeting their A-G requirements and educating them on all the resources out there and being a support system for them so that they transition smoothly into adulthood and into university life.

This research study will examine social workers' perceptions of their role in supporting foster youth pursue higher education. This study will identify common themes that social workers themselves can identify as areas where they

can better aid foster youth in achieving a higher education. Another hope that this study can potentially offer is to bring about new ideas to agencies that may implement new training on the importance of higher education in foster youth to improve practice within the social work community. Another goal of this study is that it may change social work practice on a macro level and hope to promote policy change for foster youth and higher education. This study is significant because it may help social workers identify ways to improve foster youths' access to higher education. While many studies examine this social problem from the perspective of the foster youth and their families, few studies examine the problem from the perception of social workers.

Significance of the Study for Social Work Practice

There is limited research on the role of social workers in helping foster youth achieve a higher education. Being able to achieve a higher education is useful in the prevention of typical outcomes for these foster youth students, such as ending up homeless, incarcerated, or abusing substances. In order to prevent such outcomes and improve the quality of life of these students, it is necessary for foster youth to have an equal opportunity to a higher education as much as the average population has. Being able to identify the struggles that social workers, themselves, face when trying to help a foster youth member with necessary skills to attempt to pursue a higher education will be able to bring more awareness to policy changes that could be made necessary to help social workers become more prepared for being able to help this population.

Our research will identify what services were offered to the foster youth by their social workers, what information about higher education the social workers were able to provide to these foster youth, how much of a role they believe they played in the foster youths' pursuit of an education, and what knowledge they believe would benefit them as social workers to better help the students. It is important to examine this issue more in order to fully understand what changes could be made within social work practice or in child welfare services to better serve this population. This research project will use Systems theory and Erickson's theory of development, in order to better explain why achieving a higher education, possibly, does not come easily to foster youth. In addition, this study will further demonstrate the need for this population to achieve a higher education.

This study will share the perspective of social workers on their role in being able to aid foster youth on their educational needs. This study will also explore whether social workers believe they have the necessary resources to encourage higher education within the foster youth population. By social workers providing their input, it could guide better practice interventions that could enhance social worker's ability to better help foster youth students. In addition, this study may contribute towards research by gathering information on social worker's perceptions on their experiences towards helping foster youth pursuing a higher education and what services can be improved. Our research aims to

identify the perceptions of social workers regarding their roles in foster youths'

pursuit of higher education.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter describes the literature related to the challenges foster youth face in pursuing higher education. The literature review of the challenges also outlines what foster youths, caregivers, and community stakeholders perceive as being barriers and facilitators for foster youth to pursue a higher education. The chapter focuses on: challenges faced by foster youth, the views and perceptions that foster youth and foster parents have about foster youth achieving a higher education, and the theories guiding conceptualization of this study.

Challenges Faced by Foster Youth

Foster youth experience many challenges during their lifetimes; they come into the child welfare system after an allegation of physical, sexual, emotional abuse or neglect has been substantiated. In addition, the transient and often unstable nature of foster care creates considerable barriers to youths' well-being, educational opportunities, and subsequent prospects for educational achievement.

According to Zetlin and colleagues (2012), before and after placement, foster youth often end up in lower-performing schools and struggle with teachers who fail to understand their special needs as a foster youth. Children report feeling unsupported and misunderstood by school staff. One thing that the

children reported as a possible source to help them in their education was to have a collaborative relationship with the local child welfare agencies (Zetlin et. al., 2012). This study also supports the fact that children need help being and feeling supported when it comes to their education.

Piel (2018) identified additional challenges when fostering youth transition into higher education. While 70% of foster youth anticipate going to college, only 39% end up enrolling into a two-year or four-year academic institution (Piel, 2018). Furthermore, the foster youth who do attend college struggle with the transition into higher education. These challenges include their ongoing issues with placement stability before age 18 and inadequate academic preparation for college and or a university (Piel, 2018). Once transitioned into a higher education institute, the foster youth face not having enough financial support to pay their way through their academic career, social and emotional support, and struggles to find stable housing and employment. According to Courtney and their colleagues (2011), about 18-20 percent of foster alumni report being homeless within a year of leaving their foster-care homes (as cited by Piel, 2018). This article further demonstrated that there are additional challenges faced by the foster youth college student community than the average college student. In addition, this article further supports that not only is there a variety of challenges faced by the foster youth community, but also that they lack support in order to be able to help them thrive within their education and to help them solve issues that may arise as a typical higher education student.

Views of Foster Youth and Foster Parents on Higher Education

In 2017, Greeno and colleagues (2017), conducted a study to assess the perspectives of foster parents on caregiving and training to care for the older foster youth. The researchers used a cross-sectional design to survey 242 parents, 118 of whom returned the surveys to researchers, on five research questions. They found that the parents who were surveyed and had older foster youth, between the ages of 14-21, had more experience within the foster system and seemed to have foster more children and youth than those who had younger foster children (Greeno et. al., 2017). The foster parents who were known to researchers as possibly having more experience within the foster system still identified gaps within their knowledge of how to better equip older foster children. This study serves to support the idea that foster parents themselves can state that they do not have enough knowledge or training on how to better educate their older foster youth on how to become self-resourceful or how to better prepare for transitioning life stages such as becoming a higher education student. This study further identifies the lack of preparation for foster youth to thrive in a higher education institution, as well as the need of foster parents to receive more training on the aid of preparing the foster youth for higher education.

Hallet, Westland, and Mo (2018) conducted interviews to focus on the experience of the foster youth at Port City Community College. Foster youth were

11

interviewed by the researchers in order to identify the possible struggles that these students faced as previous foster youth, such as recovering from past trauma. The researchers found that all of their participants had a perception that achieving a higher education was a way of being able to transition into adulthood in a stable way (Hallet, Westland, & Mo, 2018). Researchers also found, however, that the participants also identified the trauma that they had gone through as children as still existent and furthermore, still a struggle they had to carry with them. This article supports the fact that there is still a lack of support for these former foster youth that they feel they need. If there was more educational support, in addition to attending to the needs of recovering from trauma, then the children would be more successful within their academic careers.

Shin (2003), assessed the academic achievement of foster youth students. This study interviewed 152 foster youth and studied the educational competence through multiple regression analysis. Shin's analysis indicated that 40% of these students' variance scores included an aspiration for higher education, placement in kinship care, participation in extracurricular activities, and drug use (Shin, 2003). The study found throughout that one essential factor affected the educational attainment of the foster youth: being in in kinship placement, or placed with family members, rather than being placed out of kinship homes. This factor supports that having a stronger social support, which a lot of foster youth who are not placed with family find themselves lacking, helps

foster youth pursue and achieve a higher education. This study further supports that one thing that a lot of the students lack and hope they would have more of is that strong social and emotional support which can drive their motivation to achieving more and more throughout their academic career.

Neal (2017) samples 57 students to assess how successfully foster youth transitioned out of care and were able to further their education. Neal used the data collected from the survey to compare the results of previous foster youth to students who were never in the foster system. The researcher found that there was a connection between academic resilience and care of the students (Neal, 2017). This means that when a student is faced with a vulnerability such as trauma, they may be recovering from being involved with foster care, they must be able to face those challenges with an equally collective solution. This study further supports that while the trauma that a student who is considered previous foster youth may greatly impact their academic career outcomes, they can overcome the challenges as long as they have something to support them. For example, even if a student is recovering from the trauma faced as a child and being placed in a foster home with a stranger family, they can recover and overcome the challenge by being able to find social and emotional support. Being in the foster system is not the end all for these students and this study further can support that.

Whitman (2018) took on the challenge of addressing the unique challenges that foster youth face when continuing their postsecondary education.

Whitman conducted a secondary study and found that 80% of foster youth stated that they wanted to pursue a postsecondary education. The researcher also found, however, that in contradiction to the 80%, only 50% graduate with a high school diploma, 10% enroll into a postsecondary school, and only 1-3% of these students graduate from a four-year university (Whitman, 2018). Furthermore, Whitman noted that while most foster youth will begin their education career at a community college due to financial means, they are more likely to become homeless due to the fact that community colleges often don't provide housing for their students. This study supported the idea that although many sources may exist to aid students such as previous foster youth, many times they are not organized thoroughly enough for students to access the resources. This study serves the idea that while there are many attempts at trying to facilitate a higher education for foster youth, there are still many challenges that need to be overcome by child welfare to better prepare foster youth.

Salazar and colleagues (2016) conducted a study to analyze the effectiveness of programs that are already in place to help aid foster youth with their postsecondary education goals. Researchers formed a focus group between the foster youth and community stakeholders in order to collect recommendations for structuring intervention programs effectively to benefit previous foster youth (Salazar et al., 2016). They found that four recurring themes were brought up by the foster youth and community stakeholders; those of which included intervention development, educational advocacy intervention,

mentoring intervention, and substance abuse intervention (Salazar et al., 2016). While there are many programs that are already in place, the researchers further supported that there was a need for further development of such programs, in addition to most importantly providing consistency for these previous foster youth students.

Furthermore, much of the research demonstrates the perspectives of community stakeholders, foster youth themselves, and parents of the foster youth, but there is limited research on the perspectives of social workers. Consequently, the voices of child welfare social workers are largely absent in the literature on preparing foster youth for higher education. Given that there is a lack of studies based on the perceptions of social workers and their role of preparing foster youth for higher education, it is important that this study be conducted.

Theories Guiding Conceptualization

Two theoretical perspectives used to conceptualize the ideas in this research study are Erikson's Psychosocial Developmental Theory and Systems Theory. Erikson's psychosocial developmental theory describes eight developing stages in an individual's life from infancy to late adulthood (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2016). Each stage of human development is considered a characteristic crisis and can affect the individual's characteristics in one way or another. If each stage is coped with well, the individual will be better prepared to deal with the next stage, However, the degree to which crises in the earlier stages are resolved will determine the individual's ability to resolve crises in its later stages.

For example, during the first stage of Erikson psychosocial theory an individual becomes familiar with trust vs. mistrust (infant-18 months). This stage allows for a child to begin to feel dependent on a caregiver. Infants who receive love, encouragement, and positive affirmations consistently, start to trust that their caregiver will always provide and nurture them. Due to this consistent attachment with their caregiver, the child begins to feel a sense of trust and will be able to smoothly transition to the next stage of development. Because trust has been consistent in their life, they will take this concept into their adult life and apply it to friends, partners, and in broader aspects like their government.

Yet, if the opposite occurs and a child is experiencing neglectful or abusive life experiences which leads the child to go into a foster home the individual will lack attachments with a caregiver and can lead an infant to experience developmental delays (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2016). A child will not develop trust in caregivers or the people around them and may hinder their ability to communicate and build healthy relationships as they go into adult life. During the identity vs. role confusion (13-21) stage, it's crucial in adolescents as they are exploring and establishing their identities. If youth develop a strong sense of self, youth tend to have flourished social interactions and relationships with the people around them (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2016). However, if youth find themselves struggling with conflicting roles, they may suffer from role confusion and may "feel uncertain about their identity." Therefore, Erikson's theory can assist the researchers in understanding the development of the foster

youth population and how their life experiences can hinder their thoughts as they enter other developmental stages.

Systems theory can be understood by defining several components and their relationship to social work practice. The following elements in systems theory include system, boundaries, subsystem, homeostasis, role, relationship, input, output, feedback, interface, differentiation, entropy, negative entropy, and equifinality (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2016). A system can be defined as a set of components that are interrelated and arranged in orderly to make a functional whole (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2016). For example, a family or a public social service department are considered a system because there are different members and roles within that system that each contributes for the system to function as a (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2016). Boundaries can be defined as limitations that separate entities from one another.

Another component in the systems theory are subsystems, which are subordinate systems that constitute a more extensive system. For example, within the family system, there are subsystems, such as parental and siblings. Within the child welfare agency, the subsystems are the social workers, because they are a subsystem separated by boundaries, however still an essential part of the more extensive system for the agency to function as a whole. Another component in this theory is homeostasis, which is the balance that a system strives to maintain. However, if a change occurs in the system or subsystem, it can interrupt the homeostasis of the system. Roles can be formed differently,

17

through the environment and/or through one's culture; these roles determine how each individual in a system should behave. A relationship is defined as a connection distinguished by patterns of emotional exchange, communication, and behavioral interaction (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2016). Input occurs when energy, information, and communication are received from other systems, and output is the reaction of the system after obtaining and processing the input. Feedback is the information a system collects about their performance, and positive feedback is the information that the system receives about what it is being done correctly. The interface is the point at which two systems meet and interact with each other. Differentiation is the process in which two systems alter their paths due to new experiences and different decisions they may encounter. Entropy is the progression of a system towards disorganization, depletion, and death while negative entropy is the growth and development that a system experiences. Lastly, equifinality means that an outcome can be reached in many ways, through different developmental paths depending on the situation (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2016).

Systems theory allows us to understand individual's interactions within their environment, and how different systems can have a significant influence on one another. Each component defined in the systems theory plays a crucial role in fostering the youth's development and overall outcomes. Our hope of this study is to examine social workers' perceptions of their roles in supporting foster youth to pursue higher education. This theory is significant because it will allow

the researchers to find connections when analyzing behaviors of social workers within the child welfare system, and foster youth reaching higher education. For example, in this study, we will be focusing on social workers' interactions with foster youth and their aspiration to pursue higher education. This theory will also allow the researchers to explore how social workers and foster youths' interactions can be impacted based on different systems.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

In this section, an overview of the research methods utilized in the study of social workers' perception of their role in educating foster youth on higher education will be presented. Specifically, in this study's section, the researchers discuss in detail the study's design, the sampling methods, the data collection and instruments, the procedures, the protection of human subjects, and the methods for data analysis.

Study Design

The current study's purpose is to explore social workers' perceptions of their role in supporting foster youth pursue higher education. This study evaluated the perceptions of social workers' role for the purpose of understanding the extent to which they played when working with foster youth in their pursuit of higher education. This study provided social workers the opportunity to express their perceptions of their role and contribution when working with foster youth, in their pursuit towards a higher education. The research question is, "What are social workers' perceptions of their roles in working with foster youths to pursue a higher education?" Research indicates that there is a possibility of a gap between foster youth and higher education and perhaps the youth did not receive the support they would have liked to have, as

they pursued higher education. The reason for conducting this study was to learn social workers' perceptions of their own role and contribution when working with foster youth, in their pursuit towards a higher education and to examine if they played a significant role in helping foster youth overcome the low graduation rates and lack of support.

This study employed a qualitative design for collecting data. The researchers conducted face-to-face and telephone in-depth interviews. Interviews were conducted using an interview guide created by the researchers, which included open-ended questions that allowed participants to elaborate on their experiences and beliefs related to the topic. Using a qualitative approach gave participants the opportunity to express themselves by sharing their personal experiences, rather than being limited to choosing specific answers. Participants were asked questions in a sequenced manner. These questions addressed social workers' perceptions of their roles. Questions were structured to give participants the opportunity to share as much information as possible.

Sampling

This study used snowball and convenience sampling techniques in which the researchers recruited participants through their own personal networks of professional social workers. The sampling criteria included current and former social workers within the field of child welfare. No other criteria were used. The researchers interviewed 10 participants from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, including Hispanic, White, African American, and Asian. The

participants included 2 male and 8 female participants. Before interviewing the participants, the researchers contacted each participant to schedule a convenient time and location to meet.

The first step that was conducted was seeking approval for the research study. After approval, the researchers reached out to their personal network to recruit participants, after they were able to obtain potential participants contact information, the researchers contacted the participants through a professional email that included the studies informed consent, and purpose of the study. After the participant voluntarily agreed to participate the researchers scheduled a time and date to conduct their interviews off agency premises.

Data Collection and Instruments

The study was conducted through face-to-face and telephone interviews using an interview guide. The participants were asked demographic questions including gender, ethnicity, and highest level of education. After the demographic questions participants were asked 7 interview questions (Appendix A). These questions were designed to encourage participants to elaborate on their personal experiences and to seek comprehensive information from their responses. The interview questions included their personal support, if any; in helping foster youth achieve a higher education, the kind of support that they provided foster youth, if any; and recommendations for increasing foster youths' access to higher education.

Procedures

Researchers administered the interviews at local coffee shops, at the university of the researchers, and over the phone based on the participants' availability. Before the interview, participants were provided with an IRB approved, informed consent form. Upon completion of the interview, participants were provided a $25 Target gift card incentive for their participation. Data collection occurred from February 2020 to March 2020. Towards the end of each interview, participants were thanked and informed that the study's finding would be available for review by September 2020.

Protection of Human Subjects

Participants were interviewed on a voluntary basis and they were informed of their right to refuse to answer any question and their right to stop the interview at any time. Participants that wished to stop still received compensation without any consequences. Participants were informed that their decision to participate or refuse participation would not impact their current position in any way.

The researchers took appropriate measures to ensure the protection and confidentiality of all participants. Personal information that would reveal the participants identity was not asked nor shared. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, risk and benefits, informed consent form, and audio consent form to be audio recorded. Participants were informed of the identities of the researchers and the research supervisor for the study, IRB approval, and compensation for their participation. Participants signed the

informed consent form; however, these consent forms were kept separate from any data so as not to reveal participants' identities. Interview recordings were stored on a password protected computer that was accessed by the researchers. Upon the completion of the research, all data including the audio was securely erased from all devices.

Data Analysis

This research study utilized qualitative data analysis techniques. The interviews were audio-recorded, and the researchers took handwritten notes as needed during the interviews. The data gathered from the interviews on audio tape was transcribed by a professional transcription company, to ensure the accuracy of the interviews. Upon receiving the transcribed data, the researchers analyzed the data by using a thematic analysis technique. The researchers reviewed the transcripts individually, using open coding to identify commonalities in categories which were then grouped into themes and continued to do so while reviewing each transcript. The researchers used axial coding to group these categories into themes, noting the relationships between themes.

Summary

This study analyzes the perception of social workers' role in educating foster youth on higher education through the use of a qualitative research design, as well as a purposive sampling method. Participants for this research study were scheduled based on availability and were conducted utilizing an interview

guide. Also discussed in this section were the cautionary steps the researchers

took to protect the confidentiality of the interviewed participants. Lastly,

discussed in this section was the data analysis that pertained to this qualitative

study.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

In this section, an overview of the findings obtained from interviews conducted during a two-month period are presented. Through convenience and snowballing sampling, the researchers were able to interview a total of 10 individuals, former and current child welfare social workers within southern California, to explore their perceptions of their role in educating foster youth on higher education. This chapter describes the subject's demographic characteristics and goes in depth to describe the themes that were identified in the data.

Participants

This qualitative study utilized a snowball and convenience sample of 10 current and former child welfare social workers within Southern California. There were two male participants and eight female participants, and all participants ranged in ages from 25-50. The participants were asked about their ethnicity/race; five participants identified themselves as Hispanic, three as Caucasian, one African American, and one Asian/Pacific Islander. Four of the participants were currently working with current and former foster youth for higher education support programs. Six of the participants were currently working for a county child welfare agency within Southern California. All participants reported

receiving a master's degree in social work. Four participants held License in Clinical Social Worker (LCSW) certification. Two reported currently being in the process of obtaining their LCSW certification, and one participant was currently working on receiving a doctoral degree in Educational Leadership.

Themes

Three themes emerged from the analysis of the data. The identified themes are discussed in the following sections: barriers foster youth experience within the child welfare system, such as instability in their lives and emotional trauma; the complexity of child welfare work; and the lack of focus on education for the foster youth population, including incomplete resource knowledge by social workers, and the lack of important mentorship.

Barriers Foster Youth Experience

Six of the participants identified barriers foster youth face while in the child welfare system during their interview. Some of the barriers participants identified included the instability that comes with being a foster youth, such as relationships, placements, and education. Other participants also identified the emotional trauma foster youth endure, as a barrier for youth to do well in school. The following narratives further explain the barriers foster youth struggle with.

Instability in Relationships/Placements. One participant stated that foster youth struggle to reach out for assistance and having a stable guidance counselor that reaches out personally to foster youth is a great way to open the door for higher education. This participant mentioned that if there was a bit more

effort from these high school counselors in being able to understand that the barriers that foster youth face are different than the general population, they would be better equipped to help these foster youth.

> Their [school] counselors have said to me "A through G requirements are nice, but I just—you know, my job is to make sure they graduate high school, and I have 800 students. So that—to me, says a lot...I feel like a lot of things can get missed. Um, I think it takes extra time and effort to pull those foster youth and make sure they're doing okay (Interviewee 2).

Another participant agreed and recognized that foster youth should have designated high school counselors that will understand the many challenges of navigating life through the child welfare system. This social worker explained that high school counselors have come a long way in the way they conduct their work with foster youth high school students; however, the participant believed this work had to be continued in order to help foster youth students.

> High schools, again, I think that they're doing so much more than they were, as an old folk, an old fried social worker, I can see where they came from before. Where it was like, they didn't even know that their students were foster youth when I first started back in 2000, 1999. Now they have their own counselors to help them, so to me that's amazing to me in my lifetime that I got to see that. Just continuing that [helps foster youth] (Interviewee 10).

A different participant stated that one major setback in their educational career for foster youth is that, due to recurring changes in placement and attending different high schools, students often experience loss of transcripts and fall off track with grades and classes. This consistent switching schools causes a loss of credits, transcripts, and classes; therefore, they even struggle to graduate high school on time, sometimes.

> Meeting with my youth for the very first time, that was one of the first things we tried to track down, all the transcripts from high school 'cause it was very common for them to have gone to many different schools. See where they were at. Most of the time, they weren't on track (Interviewee 4).

One other participant brought up the idea that instead of implementing a new practice, such as more training or creating a manual, it would be smart to implement a policy in which we would affect the foster youth the least by maintaining at least one aspect of their life stable.

> I would make it mandatory that we would not be able to remove children from their school of origin. I understand sometimes we have to house 'em other places but, we'd make it mandatory that their education would be continuous where their friends were at, where they have maybe cousins. Their education has to be stable (Interviewee 9).

This participant believed that being able to keep at least their education stable would allow them to heal better from the loss of being removed from their family.

Being able to keep the same friends would be healthy for these foster youth students. In addition to this, it would most likely help the students do better in school since they would not have to start over at a new school and would avoid the loss of their transcripts.

Emotional Trauma Endured by Foster Youth. Another participant also reported that foster youth experience setbacks not commonly dealt with by the general population. These barriers include instability in their lives and emotional trauma. The participant began to describe how, when compared to the general population, foster youth wake up one day to the next and all of a sudden lose everything. This includes their family and their stable home. Another barrier they face when being taken out of their home is the grief of loss, and while they may not lose them permanently, it's the idea that these foster youth members suffer loss and it does not become acknowledged by anyone in their lives. This then creates a traumatic experience in their lives, and therefore, another barrier is placed on them when having to adjust to life with a new emotional trauma.

> [Foster youth] had at least some sort of stable foundation there. Education was consistent. Family life was consistent. They had some sort of consistency. Those tend to go on to post-secondary education and do well. The ones that have had the most severe trauma, either by family life or placement changes or in foster care, school is just a stress. It has a lotta triggers. It's something that's actually avoided in my opinion, not something that is actually pursued (Interviewee 9).

Complexity of Child Welfare Worker's Role

Eight of the participants identified the complexity of their role as a child welfare social worker as a barrier to keeping a focus on foster youth education. Some of the barriers the participants identified included limited placement resources, a high volume of caseloads the agency receives, prioritizing safety, and high caseloads per social worker.

One participant reported that social workers often find it difficult to place children in homes near their school of origin, because they are limited on availability of foster homes within their area. Having limited placement resources can make things difficult for social workers to prioritize education, while still considering the best interest of their youth.

Do I want a place with this relative? But they can't go to the same school. I think that's a better option. But do, or do, if I can't find a place where their school is of origin, how long am I gonna sit here with these kids in my office until I find a place to go? It's just really a vicious cycle (Interviewee 7).

Another participant reported that heavy caseloads can make it difficult for social workers to make the time to help youth with college applications and the financial aid application process, "If I'm burned out and I have like 37 kids and I'm just trying to survive day to day? You might not get that support. It's not really a priority right now, which isn't great but that's the reality of it" (Interviewee 10).

Similarly, a participant also described that their ability to help prepare foster youth in higher education was normally not a priority. The participant reported that because child welfare social workers have such high caseloads, it is difficult to touch on anything other than safety risk and mental health, "When your caseload is high, [social workers] tend to prioritize, like, safety risk, and placement stability, mental health. And, like, schooling just kind of gets to the bottom" (Interviewee 1).

Another participant also referenced the high volume of cases social workers receive in child welfare and how it makes it impossible to truly mentor and help each foster youth in pursuing a higher education. This is not helpful to the foster youth because instead of every worker being able to take an extra 15 minutes with each student to truly mentor them on their schooling, they must zoom through seeing them because they have so many other kids they have to see.

> I think that we need to go—especially in the extended foster care program, we need to go back to what that program really was about and to mentor the youth. And when you have 60 cases, there is no way you're gonna mentor 60 kids (Interviewee 5).

The participant believed a change that needed to happen was within the caseloads of social workers. This participant believed that with a lighter caseload, social workers would be able to take more time to look over more details with foster youth students.

One of the things that I wish I could have is, um, more time to be able to really mentor these youth. Like, not have 60 of them, but have, like, 30 of them. You know? Like, be able to have youth—be able to work with less youth to be able to provide a better service (Interviewee 5).

Focus is Not on Education for Foster Youth

Most participants reported that education was not something they were trained or encouraged to talk to their youth about. There is a lack of focus on education and the opportunities for a higher education within the foster youth population. This lack of focus on education for foster youth can be displayed across various roles, such as high school counselors, social workers, and foster parents.

Participant 9 was quick to state that child welfare workers were trained to keep the children on their caseloads safe, keeping them in school, and out of juvenile hall and trying to help youth cope with their trauma rather than encouraging higher education.

One participant described that their ability to help prepare foster youth in higher education was normally not a priority. The participant reported that because child welfare social workers have such high caseloads, it is difficult to touch on anything other than safety, "schooling just kind of gets to the bottom. So, if I had a kid that was, like, getting straight As, then I'd be, like, 'Cool,' but I'm gonna—I don't gotta worry about that" (Interviewee 1).

Another participant shared how often, the social workers had to prioritize other things and often left education on the backburner when working with foster youth. The social worker described how their specific position focused more on safety and not so much on education, especially when having to make sure that all their other kids are safe also.

So education—I don't wanna say it is ignored because it isn't, but it certainly is—it's sort of put to the side. Like, 'Let me get me to that after I make sure they're safe and their mental health and all that' (Interviewee 2).

Another participant shared that foster youth also don't usually focus on education for themselves either, "I'm seeing with a lot of our youth, either—usually kids that are coming in that have been in troubled homes, and education really not a big thing to them" (Interviewee 8).

One other participant mentioned that a large portion of foster youth are on psychotropic medications due to their struggle with mental health, "it was very frustrating at times, you know, and I got to see some of the kids, um, side effects with medication, and how that in essence affected their education and their academic focus and all of that" (interviewee 6), therefore foster youth also commonly lack the ability to focus on their education.

Limited Knowledge of Resources. Many participants noted that they lacked knowledge in the resources available for foster youth. Half of the participants did not know of support programs on college campuses that assist

foster youth in higher education. One participant stated that she did not believe that the training of social workers equipped them enough to be able to help guide foster youth into higher education, "I don't feel like there's that many resources as far as trainings. We work with [extended foster care workers], so kinda just pull their resources. I wanna say that they are more knowledgeable about the resources than I am" (Interviewee 3). Another participant shared that she actually did not know of any policies or resources when asked to identify ways that she could help prepare foster youth with pursuing and achieving a higher education, "Yeah, I don't know. Like I said, the only thing I know is AB 12, but I'm not sure exactly how that's working for our youth, and yeah, I don't know too much about the funding, what they're getting" (Interviewee 8).

A different participant stated that the issue with the training is that training does not happen often enough to train every social worker to better work with these foster youth students. And when there is training, the space is very limited to how many social workers may be able to attend the training.

> Well, here's the thing. Once you're a social worker, and it just depends on your work ethic, to me. Because you can go to trainings. There is a lot— they're gonna have—actually, they're gonna have one conference for—for transitional youth, next month. So only one of us can go" (Interviewee 5).

The final theme that was brought to light by eight of the ten interviewed social workers was the idea that there needed to be a change in the practices and the policies of social work to emphasize the importance of higher education

for foster youth. One participant shared that due to the lack of knowledge if even a resource handbook was created, it would make it a lot more accessible for social workers to aid foster youth in their pursuit of higher education, since it would explain resources and policies, "[A] go to manual where you could talk about—that could educate you real quick" (Participant 1).

Another participant shared that they believed that if more social workers simply knew more about resources and had more information on how important education within the foster youth population was, there would be better outcomes for foster youth students, "If I had a magic wand, it would be to have trainings about foster youth education...it would be nice if they could just focus a little bit more on it" (Interviewee 2).

Three other participants agreed with participant 2 that they wished there were more training on resources and policies. These social workers all believed that having the knowledge of where to direct the foster youth to look for more help, they would be able to prepare them for college from a younger age.

Lack of Mentorship. Most participants identified a lack of educational mentorship as a barrier for youth. One participant shared that being able to make these connections in which people could be consistent and a constant could help mentor a foster youth student throughout their education and in other aspects of their lives, "I think that's something. Identifying lifelong connections would be good" (Interviewee 4).

Another participant identified that even the social workers who take the additional step to truly mentor these foster youth and to help them see that the social worker actually cares create a strong mentor relationship for them with their worker.

I think that it just—that has a greater impact on the kid than you just sitting and saying to them, you know, 'How's it going? Are you happy?'. So it's just taking the—taking that little bit of time (Interviewee 2).

A different participant believed that sometimes the caseloads of social workers fluctuate so highly in numbers that they do not have the time to take the extra step and truly mentor these kids. The participant goes on to say that she believes that when foster youth have a mentor, such as the ones from a mentorship program like CASA, the foster youth thrive more, "I don't think there is many programs that are helping them. But I think it's more of linking them with—like, with a CASA worker, when things—I think they need more of a mentor (Interviewee 5).

When asked during the interview what this participant thought that the field of social work could use more of when working with the foster youth population, she mentioned mentoring. This participant simply believed that being able to provide support as in a positive and stable manner and being a role model or mentor for the foster youth we work with could be beneficial to them, "I think more mentoring, 'cause some of our kids do look up to us and see us as positive

role models, which they haven't had, so I think that's something good"

(Interviewee 8).

Summary

The hypothesis of the research study indicated that social workers would be able

to describe the way they perceive their role in influencing foster youth to pursue a

higher education. After analyzing the data, 6 common themes were identified

throughout and across the 10 interviews that were conducted by the researchers.

The social workers of this study were able to identify that their if a lack of focus

on education for foster youth, social workers also identified that foster youth face

more barriers when trying to achieve a higher education when compared to the

general population, they also stated that there is a lack of and need for

mentorship to help guide foster youth into being able to actually achieve a higher

education. Social workers also mentioned that there is a complexity in the role of

a social worker's job position and therefore makes it more difficult for the social

worker to focus on education with foster youth. The last 2 themes that were

identified was the lack of knowledge in policies and resources that are for helping

foster youth attend a higher education institution, and therefore, as the last

theme, there is a need for change in policies and social worker's roles in order to

be better role models for guiding foster youth to higher education.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Introduction

In this section, an overview of the discussion from the study of social worker's perceptions of their roles in helping foster youth achieve a higher education will be presented. More specifically, the section of this study will further explain, in a more detailed manner, the findings of how social workers believe they guide foster youth students with college preparation, what areas of education these social workers feel they lack time to focus on with foster youth, and how they believe their work on this subject could be improved. This section will also explore the limitations of this study, the recommendations for the formal practice of social work, policies, and for further research.

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to explore and examine how well social workers felt they were prepared to help foster youth seek resources and achievement in their pursuit of a higher education. The hypothesis of this study was created due to the observations of all the barriers that foster youth face in their pursuit of a higher education.

The major findings of this study demonstrate that child welfare social workers, for the most part, perceive their role as having little influence on the pursuit of a higher education for foster youth. As mentioned earlier in the study,

social workers believe foster youth have to overcome many barriers in their life that oftentimes keep them from pursuing a higher education. The study found that foster youth are faced with a lot of instability throughout their life, including instability in placement, relationships, and education. This is consistent in the literature, which suggests foster youth reported to have been faced with educational barriers, such as a history of educational instability (Courtney et al., 2016). The social workers believe that if they have at least one stable aspect of their life, the loss and emotional trauma foster youth face when being removed from their family would be less detrimental, because they would still have those close connections with peers in their school of origin.

Some participants also believed that barriers that foster youth students faced included having to work with trauma they had been exposed to and had not been resolved therapeutically. This created a challenge for foster youth students because there was a lack of focus on education when these students were living through traumatic experiences and were not able to cope with the trauma. As cited previously in this study, even foster youth college students were able to identify the trauma they had lived through and identified it as a continuous struggle as they pursued their higher education (Hallet, Westland, & Mo, 2018). This was identified within foster youth college students, however, this is a struggle that foster youth also experience throughout their k-12 education and therefore also causes a lack of preparation for a higher education.

Another finding that emerged from this study was that some participants also believed that the pressure of the demanding social worker role created a barrier for social workers to better aid foster youth in the pursuit of a higher education. They stated that due to their tight schedules and heavy workloads, it was hard to take time to really focus on education with the foster youth students individually, as much as they would have liked to. Some of the participating social workers emphasized that with the commonly busy workloads they carry, about 20 to 30 cases per social worker, the only focus was to assess each foster youth for safety as efficiently as possible and meet the next client in a timely manner. The social workers believed that if there was a lighter amount of cases for social workers to carry, they would be able to better focus on helping foster youth pursue a higher education by going over things that may be needed of them to prepare for college, for example.

Some participants also identified that when it comes to education there is a lack of being able to mentor these foster youth students to better prepare them for a higher education. The caseloads are too high to manage being able to truly mentor these foster youth students and therefore do not feel that they help a student prepare academically, for a higher education. This is consistent with the literature, in which Whitman (2018) found that there was a gap between resources available to help foster youth students attend college and students actually using these resources to attend a higher education institution. This gap

was identified due to foster youth students mentioning that they had no one in their life to truly educate them on a higher education and how to achieve it.

The third theme that emerged from this study was that there was a lack of focus on education identified within various aspects of a foster youth student's life. This included foster youth students not being able to focus on achieving a higher education, as well as social workers not prioritizing education, but simply prioritizing safety. This also included a lack of support from teachers who could understand the struggles of a foster youth student in comparison to the struggles of the general population student. As cited previously in the study, foster youth students at their schools often felt misunderstood by the staff and felt that they had no support from the staff in understanding that foster youth students have specific needs that are not being met, such as help coping with trauma (Zetlin et. al., 2012).

Some participants believed that the lack of prioritization of education was also demonstrated by foster youth students themselves due to having to deal with issues that are not normally dealt with when compared to the general population. Social worker participants demonstrated that they understood the struggles that foster youth students deal with, such as coping with the loss of living with their families and finding stability in their lives. This makes it difficult to focus on education, getting good grades, and preparing for college. This is in accordance with the literature review which states that ongoing issues with stability in the lives of foster youth students before they even turn 18 years of

age, creates inadequate education and inadequate academic preparation for college or university (Piel, 2018). Social workers acknowledge that there is a lack of focus on education for these students, but do not believe that their outcomes should remain like so.

Limitations

One of the limitations of the research study is the inability to generalize the results to all social workers. Due to the sample size of 10 social workers who have worked, or are currently working with child welfare agencies, it is unclear if the data is representative of all child welfare social workers. The study aimed to examine the perception social workers have of their role in educating foster youth to pursue a higher education. This study solely looked at a county child welfare social worker population within Southern California rather than a larger population. Furthermore, this study looked at all county child welfare social workers in all positions, rather than only considering social workers that strictly work with foster youth, such as Independent Living Program (ILP) social workers and Extended Foster Care (EFC) social workers. Another limitation of this study is the lack of diversity in terms of gender. Only two participants out of ten identified as male. The findings from these participants may not be a representation of the perspectives of male social workers working with foster youth in their pursuit of a higher education. Furthermore, some participants indicated that they rarely worked with foster youth and if they did, it was for a short period of time, or often the youth was too young to discuss anything in

regards to higher education, which may not accurately represent their perspectives of working with foster youth when discussing higher education.

Another limitation is that this study did not include the perspectives of foster youth in higher education, specifically to identify the barriers they experience and what supported and motivated them to pursue an education. Therefore, this study lacked insight on foster youths' perceptions and recommendations on what they think could be implemented to better aid social workers in preparing them for higher education.

Strengths

Strengths of this study include the amount of experience each participant expressed in the field of child welfare, each participant had over five years of experience. The findings represented each participants' different experiences when working with foster youth in the field, as well as different policies that were in place and more effective in the past. Participants were asked open-ended questions to avoid any leading answers and perceptions the researchers might have had. The qualitative research allowed the participants to share their personal experiences and to provide detailed information about their perceptions.

Recommendations for Social Work Practice, Policy, and Research

This study brought to light the view and perspective of social workers on their own role in how they felt they were able to influence or mentor foster youth students into achieving a higher education and a post-secondary institution, such

as a college, trade school, or university. The findings that emerged in this study may encourage the influence of social work practice, policies, and research to better develop future ideas to improve and make changes in order to identify how to better help foster youth students in achieving a higher education.

Practice. Some of the participants who were no longer in the county child welfare agencies but were now working with foster youth students in high school and to help achieve a higher education, believed that social workers should take more time with each foster youth student to talk about education. While it is evident that child welfare social workers already have a role that requires a lot of time and work, it is also demonstrated that simply taking an extra 10 minutes to talk to a foster youth student who may have never thought about their future could make a remarkable difference. If social workers could take just an extra few minutes to demonstrate that they care about the student's future and their education in order to better their future, it could have a great impact on foster youth and the way their aspect of their future and the goals they hope to accomplish. Therefore, it is recommended that social workers begin to implement conversations about education when meeting with the foster youth on their caseload. Taking just a few minutes could begin to pave the way for students who may either be lost when planning for their future or who may just need a bit of a push to develop a clearer plan on how to reach their own educational goals. It is also recommended that in every role that social workers are involved in the lives of foster youth students; education be brought up into the conversation.

45

For example, investigative social workers are the ones who come into the homes that are referred to child welfare and run an investigation on the family to determine if the children's safety is at risk or not. When there is enough evidence to remove the children, it is recommended that from that moment the social work is going to remove the children that they ask about their school and see how they do in their school and aim to keep the children in the school of their origin if that is what the children would like. It is recommended that social workers who work with the children once they are already placed in a new home, take the extra few minutes to talk about the child's future and how they plan to get there, most of the careers chosen will one way or another lead to the children still having to achieve a post-secondary education to achieve their career.

Policy. In terms of policy, many of the participants believed that there is not an adequate amount of training, or really any for that matter, on how or what to educate foster youth on when it comes to achieving a higher education. This involves a lack of knowledge in resources to better guide foster youth students with their education, for example.

One recommendation for future policy would be to provide child welfare social workers with supplemental training on foster youth and education and how to better prepare them for achieving their goals. It would be recommendable that counties nationwide provide a sort of manual that social workers could refer to in order to identify resources that could be beneficial to foster youth when needing specific help with education. This would also lead to more timely efficient work to

help social workers find educational resources to better continue to plant the seed for higher education.

Many participants shared the idea that the caseload that a social worker usually carries is too busy to really take time to focus a little more on each individual foster youth student. It is recommended that future policy makers take into account hiring more social workers and therefore creating a lower number of caseloads that each worker carries. It is possible that if each social worker had fewer children on their cases, they would take more time to truly mentor the children that they work with. It is possible that the long-term outcomes of social workers being able to serve more quality time with clients instead of quantity time could be much more beneficial and would therefore further create a lower number of people needing help from the child welfare system.

Research. Foster youth are a vulnerable population that oftentimes face many adverse experiences throughout their life, and unfortunately come in contact with social workers very often. Therefore, it is important that more research be conducted on ways that social workers can effectively aid foster youth on their pursuit for higher education. Interviewing larger groups of diverse child welfare social workers across the United States can provide additional insight on ways that social workers have assisted foster youth in higher education.

In addition, future research could focus on identifying the impact foster youth support programs within high schools, community colleges, and

Universities have on foster youth, throughout their educational careers. This can be researched by distributing surveys upon foster youth graduates, who can help identify the different aspects of the support programs that seemed most impactful throughout their educational journey.

Another area that can be beneficial for future research is the perception that ILP and EFC social workers have of their role in educating foster youth to achieve a higher education. By obtaining more knowledge on a population of social workers that work closely with foster youth in terms of education, there can me more insight on additional barriers that can be causing a gap between foster youth and higher education.

Lastly, further research can be gained through the perceptions of foster youth. Gaining more insight on what has helped foster youth be successful throughout their educational careers can allow researchers, gain more knowledge on the support and resources that have helped foster youth achieve a higher education.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this qualitative study was conducted to evaluate the perspectives of social worker's roles in helping foster youth achieve a higher education. Our findings suggest that although social workers do not perceive their role as a large influence on the pursuit of higher education for foster youth, social workers are aware of the barriers foster youth struggle with. The study found that foster youth are faced with a lot of instability, trauma, and lack of

48

resources, which ultimately impacts foster youths' lives, which makes it challenging for youth to achieve a higher education. Our study suggests that if social workers took the extra time when working with foster youth, they can plant the seed of higher education early on, while also being a mentor and building relationships with foster youth to have a stronger and more impactful outcome for them. It is hoped that this study will help provide knowledge about some of the barriers foster youth struggle with and some of the policies that need to improve to better aid foster youth in higher education.

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION FROM

Instructions: Please provide a response to the following questions:

1. What is your gender?

    a. Male

    b. Female

    c. Non-binary

    d. Prefer to self-explain:

    e. Prefer not to say

2. What is your race/ ethnicity?

    a. White

    b. Hispanic or Latino

    c. Black or African American

    d. Native American or American Indian

    e. Asian / Pacific Islander

    f. Other

3. What is your highest level of education completed?

    a. High School

    b. Some College

    c. Associates Degree

    d. Bachelor's Degree

    e. Graduate Degree

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1) Please tell me about your role as a social worker at this agency.
a) How many years?
b) Other professional experience?
c) Educational background?

2) Tell me about your experience with foster youth particularly around education.
a) What are their goals?
b) What kinds of support do you provide?
c) When do you start talking with them about college?

3) What programs/resources are available to help foster youth go to college?
a) Any programs for high schoolers?
b) Any programs at colleges/universities?
c) What do you typically provide?

4) How do you help with academic preparation for youth who might want to go to college?
a) Grades, transcripts?
b) ACT/SAT prep and test taking?
c) College applications?

5) How do you help youth prepare financially for college?
a) What sources of funding are available?
b) How accessible are these sources of funding? Are they sufficient?

6) How would you describe your own ability to counsel foster youth about going to college?
a) What training, preparation have you had?
b) What resources can you access?
c) What resources do you wish you had?

7) What recommendations do you have for increasing foster youth access to higher education?
a) What can social workers do?
b) What can your agency do?

c) What can schools (high school or college) do?

APPENDIX B

INFORMED CONSENT

INFORMED CONSENT

The study in which you are asked to participate is designed to examine social workers role in educating foster youth pursue higher education. The study is being conducted by Danahly Reyes and Magally Villarreal, MSW students under the supervision of Dr. Deirdre Lanesskog, professor Dr. Janet Chang in the School of Social Work, California State University, San Bernardino. The study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board Social Work Sub-Committee, California State University, San Bernardino

PURPOSE: The purpose of the study is to examine social workers' perceptions of their roles in supporting foster youth pursue higher education.

DESCRIPTION: Participants will be asked a few questions about their assistance in providing youth with information regarding college and university programs that support foster youth, as well as their knowledge of resources to give to foster youth students. The researchers will also ask about the preparation process social workers use with youth when applying for admission, financial aid, grants, and scholarships, and some demographics.

PARTICIPATION: Your participation in the study is totally voluntary. You can refuse to participate in the study or discontinue your participation at any time without any consequences.

CONFIDENTIALITY OR ANONYMITY: Your responses will remain anonymous and data will be reported in group form only.

DURATION: It will take approximately 30 minutes to complete the interview.

RISKS: There is the risk that participants may feel uncomfortable, but no more than one would feel in everyday life.

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The California State University · Bakersfield · Channel Islands · Chico · Dominguez Hills · East Bay · Fresno · Fullerton · Humboldt · Long Beach · Los Angeles
Maritime Academy · Monterey Bay · Northridge · Pomona · Sacramento · San Bernardino · San Diego · San Francisco · San Jose · San Luis Obispo · San Marcos · Sonoma · Stanislaus

BENEFITS: Subjects can voice resources foster youth lack without receiving backlash from county, due to keeping identity confidential. Participants will also directly receive a $25-dollar gift card to Starbucks upon completion of interview.

VIDEO/AUDIO/PHOTOGRAPH: I understand that this research will be audio recorded Initials___.

CONTACT: If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Dr. Dierdre Lanesskog at 909-537-7222 (email: Deirdre.Lanesskog@csusb.edu)

RESULTS: Results of the study can be obtained from the Pfau Library ScholarWorks, (http://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu) at California State University, San Bernardino after December 2020.

This is to certify that I read the above and I am 18 years or older.

_____   _____
X   Date

I agree to be tape recorded: _____ Yes _____ No

Thank you for your participation. If you have any questions about the study, please feel free to contact Dierdre Lanesskog at 909-537-7222. If you would like to obtain a copy of the group results of this study, please contact the ScholarWorks database (http://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/) after September 2018.

909.537.5501
5500 UNIVERSITY PARKWAY, SAN BERNARDINO, CA 92407-2393

The California State University · Bakersfield · Channel Islands · Chico · Dominguez Hills · East Bay · Fresno · Fullerton · Humboldt · Long Beach · Los Angeles
Maritime Academy · Monterey Bay · Northridge · Pomona · Sacramento · San Bernardino · San Diego · San Francisco · San Jose · San Luis Obispo · San Marcos · Sonoma · Stanislaus

APPENDIX C

INTERNAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY
SAN BERNARDINO

January 27, 2020

CSUSB INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
Administrative/Exempt Review Determination
Status: Determined Exempt
IRB-FY2020-146

Magally Villarreal Deirdre Lanesskog, Danahly Reyes
CSBS - Social Work
California State University, San Bernardino
5500 University Parkway
San Bernardino, California 92407

Dear Magally Villarreal Deirdre Lanesskog, Danahly Reyes

Your application to use human subjects, titled "The Role of Social Workers within the Education of Foster Youth" has been reviewed and approved by the Chair of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of California State University, San Bernardino has determined that your application meets the requirements for exemption from IRB review Federal requirements under 45 CFR 46. As the researcher under the exempt category you do not have to follow the requirements under 45 CFR 46 which requires annual renewal and documentation of written informed consent which are not required for the exempt category. However, exempt status still requires you to attain consent from participants before conducting your research as needed. Please ensure your CITI Human Subjects Training is kept up-to-date and current throughout the study.

The CSUSB IRB has not evaluated your proposal for scientific merit, except to weigh the risk to the human participants and the aspects of the proposal related to potential risk and benefit. This approval notice does not replace any departmental or additional approvals which may be required.

Your responsibilities as the researcher/investigator reporting to the IRB Committee the following three requirements highlighted below. Please note failure of the investigator to notify the IRB of the below requirements may result in disciplinary action.

- Submit a protocol modification (change) form if any changes (no matter how minor) are proposed in your study for review and approval by the IRB before implemented in your study to ensure the risk level to participants has not increased,
- If any unanticipated/adverse events are experienced by subjects during your research, and
- Submit a study closure through the Cayuse IRB submission system when your study has ended.

The protocol modification, adverse/unanticipated event, and closure forms are located in the Cayuse IRB System. If you have any questions regarding the IRB decision, please contact Michael Gillespie, the Research Compliance Officer. Mr. Michael Gillespie can be reached by phone at (909) 537-7588, by fax at (909) 537-7028, or by email at mgillesp@csusb.edu. Please include your application approval identification number (listed at the top) in all correspondence.

If you have any questions regarding the IRB decision, please contact Michael Gillespie, the Research Compliance Officer. Mr. Michael Gillespie can be reached by phone at (909) 537-7588, by fax at (909) 537-7028, or by email at mgillesp@csusb.edu. Please include your application approval identification number (listed at the top) in all correspondence.

Best of luck with your research.

Sincerely,

Donna Garcia

Donna Garcia, Ph.D., IRB Chair
CSUSB Institutional Review Board

DG/MG

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ASSIGNED RESPONSIBILITIES PAGE

This research project was completed as a collaboration between two partners: Magally Villarreal and Danahly C. Reyes. The following sections were completed as follows:

1. Data Collection and Data Analysis: Magally Villarreal and Danahly C. Reyes

2. Written Report and Presentation of Findings

   a. Abstract: Magally Villarreal and Danahly C. Reyes

   b. Acknowledgments: Magally Villarreal and Danahly C. Reyes

   c. Chapter One. Introduction: Magally Villarreal and Danahly C. Reyes

   d. Chapter Two. Literature Review: Danahly C. Reyes

   e. Chapter Three. Methods: Magally Villarreal

   f. Chapter Four. Results: Magally Villarreal and Danahly C. Reyes

   g. Chapter Five. Discussion: Magally Villarreal and Danahly C. Reyes

3. Supplemental Materials

   a. IRB Application: Magally Villarreal and Danahly C. Reyes

   Formatting and Edits: Magally Villarreal and Danahly C. Reyes

4. Presentation of Findings: Magally Villarreal and Danahly C. Reyes