

The Impact of a Training Component on the “Job” Satisfaction of Foster Parents: Implications for HRD

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Abstract: Foster parent retention is an important component of the well-being of foster children. This study investigates foster parents’ perceptions about their post-licensing training and the impact that an individualized continuing education plan may have on their satisfaction. Suggestions are made for further exploration of foster parents’ satisfaction and retention through HRD perspectives.

In the U. S., over 400,000 children are living in the foster care system, with 46% of these children residing in non-relative family foster homes (Administration for Children & Families, 2015). Foster parents are extremely important to the well being of these children, but unfortunately, there is historically a shortage of foster homes and a large turnover of foster parents (Murray, Tarren-Sweeney, & France, 2011; Rhodes, Orme, & Buehler, 2001). Along with recruiting new foster homes, efforts to maintain or even increase the number of available foster homes are largely dependent on the retention of current foster parents. Equipping foster parents to navigate the system as well as meet the unique needs of the children in their care is considered a vital element in the efforts to increase the satisfaction and retention of foster parents (Buehler, Rhodes, & Orme, 2006). Although a few studies have looked at foster parent training programs (Cooley & Petren, 2011; Murray et al., 2011; Rork & McNeil, 2011), implications have not been developed from a Human Resource Development (HRD) perspective regarding these training programs’ effects of the role, or “job” satisfaction of foster parents.

Factors involving the “job” satisfaction of foster parents are difficult to identify, as their role is somewhat ambiguous from a human resource perspective. Foster parents do receive some compensation to cover the costs of the child in their home, and they have rules and regulations to abide by from both the state and their licensing agency, but they are not “employees.” Although they are not employees, foster parents cannot be categorized as “volunteers” either. They do volunteer to become a foster parent and understand there is no wage or salary for them, but they also agree to provide around-the-clock care for a child in their home. This is much more involved than being a mere volunteer; this falls into a potentially vague area for understanding motivation, satisfaction, and retention.

Foster Parent Training

Florida currently requires thirty hours of pre-service training as part of the screening and application process for becoming a licensed foster parent. Twelve hours per year of continuing education are then required to maintain an active licensure. Even with this current level of training, some foster parents indicate that they are still unprepared for issues that arise with their foster children (Cooley & Petren, 2011; Pasztor, Hollinger, Inkelas, & Halfon, 2006). The ensuing frustration and emotional strain can cause these foster parents to lose confidence, become dissatisfied, and quit. What can a closer look at this required training component of foster care tell us about HRD strategies that may be beneficial to the satisfaction and retention of foster parents?

Purpose of the Research

The high dropout rate of foster parents has long been a concern to the child welfare system, and researching and addressing the reasons why foster parents quit or stop accepting children can begin to improve the job satisfaction and retention rates of these very important front line providers (Buehler et al., 2006; Cooley & Petren, 2011; Pasztor & Wynne, 1995). Utilizing an inquiry regarding post-licensing continuing education (an aspect of foster care that is a requirement for all foster parents), the purpose of this study was (a) to explore foster parents' perceptions and feelings regarding their post-licensing continuing education training, and (b) to explore foster parents' perceptions of utilizing an individualized continuing education plan (ICEP) developed around the specific needs of their foster home. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do foster parents describe their post-licensing continuing education experiences?
2. What are foster parents' perceptions regarding the value of their post-licensing continuing education trainings?
3. What impact do foster parents feel an individualized continuing education plan (ICEP) will have on their knowledge, confidence, job satisfaction, and desire to continue fostering?

Method

Participants

Eleven foster parents from two licensing agencies in southeast Florida participated in this study. The foster parents were contacted by an employee at their agency and asked if they would consider participating in this study. The contact information was then passed on to the researcher, and the parents were contacted to confirm their willingness and availability to participate. The foster parents' participation was voluntary, and no compensation was received.

Data Collection

This study first utilized a questionnaire asking the foster parents about their feelings toward specific issues of preparedness, confidence, and satisfaction. Questions were structured for a Likert-Scale response ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." A semi-structured interview was also conducted with each participant. The interview was conducted as an "extended conversation" (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 12) and lasted approximately 60 minutes. The combined use of the questionnaire and the interview (a) gathered data that addressed specific foster parent issues discussed in the literature, and (b) explored perceptions that could be self-prompted and expanded upon during a conversation.

Data Analysis

The survey responses were compiled and are reported as percentages of participants who responded "agree" or "strongly agree" to the particular issue prompt. Recordings from the interviews were transcribed and then reviewed for recurring themes among participants' responses. These themes were then organized by this study's research questions.

Findings and Discussion

The results of the questionnaire reveal overall positive feelings of foster parents regarding their levels of preparedness for meeting the needs of the children in their care. The lowest levels came in the categories of feeling prepared for system issues (43%) and feeling prepared to help a child through a sense of loss (10%). A full 100% of participants feel that they make a difference

by being a foster parent.

Table 1
Foster Parent Feelings and Perceptions

Issue	Agree/strongly agree
Feel confident	86%
Feel like I make a difference	100%
Feel satisfied	86%
Feel prepared for:	
Agency issues	71%
System issues	43%
Caseworkers	86%
Child's feelings of loss	10%
Attachment issues	86%
Managing child's behaviors	86%
Birth family issues	71%

How do Foster Parents Describe Their Post-Licensing Continuing Education Experience?

The first research question asks how foster parents describe their post-licensing continuing education experience. The first interview question simply asked parents to describe their post licensing education experience. One major theme that emerged regarding an explanation of the general process was accessibility, or delivery of, the classes (Rork & McNeil, 2011). Some training sessions are offered online or through self-study, but six hours per year need to be obtained through live classes. One father spoke a lot about the accessibility of an online course versus a live course: "You've got to do six hours live – and the live one's a hard one to do; we're busy and we have to carve out an evening." Another foster parent concurred: "It's just frustrating personally because of our situation [an aging parent living with them] and living so far from where they hold them." Referring to the online course options, most foster parents found them convenient, with one participant stating, "You learn something...and you can do it in the comfort of your own home." No parent ever referred to the post licensing education as an opportunity, and the participants seemed to widely describe this education only in practical terms of required hours and class formats.

What are Foster Parents' Perceptions Regarding the Value of Their Post-licensing Education Trainings?

The second research question addressed the foster parents' perceptions regarding the *value* of their continuing education requirement. Interview questions designed to gather this information clearly asked about the perceived value of different trainings and the value of the education requirement as a whole. There was mixed response regarding agency or foster parent meetings that were social in nature but awarded continuing education hours. One foster parent

stated, “I learn a lot by interacting with other parents at the picnic and social events.” Another stated that she did not think of events or social gatherings as educational. All respondents relayed that they perceived value from the trainings when the topics were “specific” and “practical” (Pasztor et al., 2006).

Some respondents felt that the continuing education classes being offered involved information already known to them. One mother who fosters medically needy children and has more stringent training requirements found her trainings to be “very adequate” and “always informational.” Many respondents referred to trainings on the “system” as very helpful for navigating their needs of the children in their care, thus reiterating the perceived value of trainings with specific and practical topics.

What Impact do Foster Parents Feel an Individualized Continuing Education Plan (ICEP) Will Have on Their Knowledge, Confidence, and Job Satisfaction?

Research question 3 asks about the impact of an individualized continuing education plan as a way of identifying continuing education opportunities specifically relevant to that particular household. All participants felt that an individualized plan would be beneficial in their role as a foster parent. Many felt that it would help them gauge their own progress and development, thus increasing their job satisfaction (Cooley & Petran, 2011; Whelan, Oxlad, & Lushington, 2009). One foster mother stated that it would make her feel better about the licensing agency if she were “actually being asked for their input on trainings and topics.” Other parents expressed that same sentiment about wanting to contribute ideas to some agency policies and procedures. They felt this would evidence support from their agency (Sanchirico, Lau, Jablonka, & Russell, 1998). One parent was cautious about an individualized plan being mandatory, as she felt it would be “just one more thing we had to do.” This same parent felt it would be beneficial if the specific topics or trainings were “suggestions rather than requirements.”

Significance and Implications for HRD

The findings from exploring foster parents’ experiences and perceptions of their post licensing continuing education can provide valuable insights for foster care agencies when they are designing their post licensing educational programs and opportunities. Unfortunately, none of the participants spoke of their post-licensing training as an opportunity for learning or growth. This may indicate that the current focus is on achieving the required number of hours rather than maximizing the learning opportunities. These respondents spoke about wanting specific topics addressed rather than broad “discussions.” Although these respondents felt that a “requirement” for specific training based on their foster child’s situation may feel like a burden, they all agreed that “suggestions” through an individualized continuing education plan (ICEP) would be valuable to them while choosing classes to attend. This concept can be explored further by actually implementing an individualized continuing education plan with foster parents as their training year begins and helping them to locate the trainings and classes that will help them best address the needs in their particular homes. Assessing these parents’ satisfaction levels at the end of the year can provide some short-term insights, and longer-term studies can see the impact that the ICEPs have on retention rates.

Human Resource Development professionals have long studied employee retention and implemented practices to increase job satisfaction, job retention, and employee engagement. HRD professionals have also tried to perfect the implementation of professional development plans (similar to ICEP), which include education and training. The HRD profession has not yet addressed foster parents as a group to study these concepts. We can agree that foster parents are

hard to place in a neatly defined category: they are not employees, but they do receive compensation, have regulations to follow, and have ongoing expectations placed on them. Foster parents are not mere volunteers who pick and choose certain tasks and activities in which they will participate. Their duties are around-the-clock and in their own homes. Although harder to categorize, foster parents as a group would certainly benefit from the theories, strategies and practices being developed and implemented by the HRD profession for the corporate and organizational sector.

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