Fostering Success:

Evaluating the sine qua non collaboration of

the New Hampshire Foster  Parent Training Program

and the use of Collaboration Evaluation and Improvement Framework

(CEIF) to Educate Stakeholders

Suzanne M. Moberly, MEd, C.A.G.S.

Granite State College

Concord, New Hampshire, USA

and

Plymouth State University

Plymouth, New Hampshire, USA

Paper presented at the 27th Annual Conference of the American Evaluation

Association, Washington, DC, USA. October 17, 2013.

**Abstract**

The State of New Hampshire’s Division of Children, Youth, and Families (NHDCYF) and the Education and Training Partnership (ETP) at Granite State College provide a collaborative licensing training program for foster caregivers. The Fostering Success study examines the efficacy of this training program. As the study progressed, it was clear that quantifying data and tracking the types of training foster parents have participated in does not reveal the true story of whether or not specific trainings contribute to positive placement outcomes for children in care. Will framing the Fostering Success study within the Collaboration Evaluation and Improvement Framework (CEIF) (Woodland & Hutton, 2012), help this sine qua non collaboration understand how their overlapping organizational structures work to influence their goal of educating foster parents to meet the challenges of parenting children in care?

**Introduction**

Woodland and Hutton (2013) describe sine qua non collaborative evaluation as “a shared purpose—two or more entities (organizations and people) come together or stay together for a reason—to achieve a vision, or do something that could not otherwise be accomplished in isolation” (p. 370). The ongoing 16 year relationship of the New Hampshire Division of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) with the Education and Training Partnership (ETP) at Granite State College (GSC) in Concord, New Hampshire to provide training and education to prospective and licensed foster and adoptive parents and relative caregivers is an example of a sine qua non organizational collaboration. Neither entity could accomplish the overarching objective of providing education to resource parents (the collective term for foster, adoptive, or relative caregivers) without the support of the other. The Education and Training Partnership at Granite State College provides the expertise of content knowledge, curriculum design, and the general infrastructure of course offerings, participant tracking, and record keeping that assists NHDCYF in providing the initial training for new resource parents. The program also provides on-going training for state licensed foster, adoptive, and relative caregivers.

The relationship between the New Hampshire Division of Children, Youth, and Families and the Education and Training Partnership is an example of a complex system of interorganizational collaboration, which Woodland & Hutton (2013) characterize as a “nested” simultaneous structure that includes intraorganizational and interprofessional relationships as well (p. 370). Staff of NHDCYF and the ETP overlap on various committees and staff functions of each organization are required to maintain program functionality and coordinate needs, development of a continuing and unified vision, and an equally agreed upon purpose and utility of how to execute that purpose.

This study uses findings from a sine qua non collaborative evaluation design to assess if there is a common essence as to what factors influence individual experience of resource parents in parenting children in care. The purpose of the study was to determine if commonalities exist in the personal motivations of individuals seeking to become licensed caregivers;  **t**o ascertain if resource parents feel that the FACES (**F**oster and **A**doptive **C**are **E**ssentialS) training program adequately prepares them to have a child placed in their home; **t**o determine if there a correlation between positive placement outcomes and the amount of training that people receive to become licensed caregivers through the State foster parent program; and **t**hrough the analysis of data collection, if the evaluation’s results support increasing the *FACES* training hours to include, for example, an advanced trauma course and/or required advanced courses for families seeking to adopt.

NHDCYF stakeholders initially requested that the evaluation be designed to focus solely upon participants’ perception of preparedness upon completing FACES. NHDCYF sought to ascertain if newly licensed foster or adoptive parents were now able to apply and transfer knowledge up through the four levels of the Kirkpatrick Training Evaluation Model upon completion of the FACES training. The four levels of Kirkpatrick's evaluation model essentially measure:

* reaction of student - what they thought and felt about the training
* learning - the resulting increase in knowledge or capability
* behavior - extent of behavior and capability improvement and implementation/application
* results - the effects on the business or environment resulting from the trainee's performance (Kirkpatrick, 2013).

It is important to note that at the time of the study, NHDCYF was, and is now, currently involved with an outside evaluator who was using the Kirkpatrick Model to evaluate the effectiveness of staff training on individual staff performance levels. The Kirkpatrick Model was designed to assess the effectiveness of education and training provided to individuals within a particular business, and if the training resulted in a Return on Investment (ROI) by improving individual employee performance, thereby increasing the performance level of the organization as a whole (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2006). Within an organization the transfer of knowledge through the levels was impacted by how the organization as a whole, including supervisors, supported, used, and reinforced the training material (p. 78).

At this juncture, it was useful to consider Cousins, et al (2013), who ask the evaluator to consider the following when designing a collaborative inquiry:

What are the information needs of the program community and to

what extent do they vary? How has context shaped those informational needs?

How can evaluation, and specifically collaborative approaches, help

stakeholders to meet identified needs?...Collaboration must therefore

be negotiated between evaluators and members of the program community,

broadly defined, if collaborative inquiry in evaluation is to be meaningful,

productive, and healthy for communities of program practice (p.5).

Deeper inquiries revealed that the evaluand sought to determine if *FACES* should be modified and/or expanded to more effectively meet the knowledge and skill needs of newly licensed parents. The evaluand also wished to gather data from currently licensed parents on their overall experience with NHDCYF and analyze this information to assess if common factors exists which could be utilized to improve the retention of existing foster parents.

Woodland and Hutton (2012) encourage the evaluator “in addition to raising one’s own literacy, to consider how to facilitate an increase in stakeholder understanding of collaboration” (p. 372). Through a series of discussions, the evaluator and the evaluand reached the conclusion that a foster or adoptive parent’s experience in being a resource parent, and how that experience contributed to positive or negative outcomes for children in their care, was the result of several intersecting factors, which could not be distilled down to one or the other as the sole influence on an individual’s perceived experience as a resource parent. The intertwining and the “shared purpose” (p. 372) of each organization, resulted in Woodland & Hutton’s (2012) sine qua non Collaboration and Evaluation Improvement (CEIF) Framework (p. 367) being selected as an appropriate model for the Fostering Success evaluation model.

The CEIF framework is comprised of five entry points:

1. operationalizing the construct of the collaboration;
2. identifying and mapping communities of practice;
3. monitoring stages of development;
4. assessing levels of integration;
5. and assessing cycles of inquiry (Woodland & Hutton, 2012, p. 367).

Various stages of discussion moved the interorganizational team through CEIF stages of one and two. What were the questions that we wished to answer? Who were the interconnected players within the organization? Who should be included in the study? How should information be shared? The evaluator asked the evaluand as the study progressed to consider whether or not a family system, i.e. parent and child relationships, could be effectively evaluated by using the same criteria as the organization’s employee training program.

**Background**

As part of **CEIF** **Step #1**: Operationalize collaboration, the evaluator sought to educate herself on types of and need for evaluations previously conducted on foster training programs.

The diversity within how various foster training programs have been evaluated continues to perpetuate ambiguity as to the effectiveness of such programs. In an effort to standardize foster training programs around the country, the Administration for Children and Families, which is the federal bureau and governing agent of state child welfare agencies, has been urging individual states to demonstrate that state sponsored, and often supported, foster parent training programs are not only effective in preparing foster parents to successfully parent a child in need of out of home placement as a result of abuse and/or neglect, but to also provide evidence through program evaluation that such programs are evidence based. Hundreds of programs around the country have been the subject of research specifically to establish that the program is evidence based and therefore of value to its stakeholders (Piescher, Schmidt & LiLiberte, 2008; Rork & McNeil, 2011).

Upon reviewing the outcomes of numerous studies, it is clear that part of the problem within the existing research is that by focusing on the intended outcome of producing a training program which demonstrates evidence based practice through quantifying how many foster parents did this or that, that the actual value of the programs has been overlooked. The question is how to structure an evaluation of a foster training program that incorporates an assessment of its value to its various stakeholders while also offering concrete data to support whether or not it contributes to “what evaluators refer to as social betterment” (Mark et al, 2000 & Weiss, 1998 as qtd.in Julnes, 2012). “[Michael Scriven] argues that, ‘evaluation is not just the process of determining facts about things (including their effects)… [rather] an evaluation must, by definition, lead to a *particular type* of conclusion—one about merit, worth, or significance—usually expressed in language of good/bad, better/worse, well/ill, elegantly/poorly, etc. (Scriven, 2003, p.16 as qtd. in Alkin, Vo, & Chase, 2012, p. 29).

As a foster parent training program inherently exists for the “social betterment” of society and the underlying context of what drives the program, the nurturing and rearing of children and the health of families, resides at the core of the program, the “value”, therefore must also be defined by how it is perceived to meet the needs of the stakeholders as well as examining the nuts and bolts of measurable outcomes. “For Scriven, ‘valuing’ is the central component of evaluation and is what distinguishes evaluation from other types of systematic inquiry” (Alkin, et al., 2012).

“According to researchers, implementing evidence-based programs helps ensure that a program is based on proven or tested theory of change” (Children’s Services Council of Palm Beach County, 2007). Price, Chamberlain, Landsverk, and Reid (2009) state that “one of the desirable outcomes of any parent training would be enduring changes in foster- and kin parent child rearing practices.” Again the question arises as to how to quantify what is in essence a very qualitative entity by virtue of the elemental humanness of the subject being examined.

The question to consider when designing the methodology to determine a program’s effectiveness is to decide whether or not the stakeholders are primarily interested in simple factual outcomes, or if they are also interest in evaluating the program within the larger context in which it operates. Brian T. Yates, a well known program evaluator, argues “most evaluations exclude meaningful information on the types and amounts of resources that were and were not available to the program in the context in which it operated during the evaluation” (as qtd. in Patton, 2012, p. 101). In other words, perhaps not all evaluations evaluate the totality of context in which a particular program may operate, but “it is important to think of evidence based practice as a process of posing a question, searching for and evaluating the evidence, and applying the evidence within a client-or policy- specific context” (Reghr, Stern, & Shlonsky, 2007 as qtd. in Piescher, et al, 2008, p. 5).

The Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, H.R. 3443, requires that all foster parents be trained to meet the needs of children, but it is vague as to exactly what may constitute this training. The amount of minimal training hours that each state requires of foster parents varies tremendously from Michigan requiring a base of six hours to North Carolina and Virginia requiring a minimum of 40 hours of pre-service training for licensure (State Foster Parent Training Requirements, 2012). New Hampshire falls in the middle with a minimum of 21 hours of pre-service training and an additional 12 hours minimum of training for each year of licensure (NHDCYF, 2012).

The question is whether or not, given the level of maltreatment most children experience before entering the foster care system, is 21 hours of basic training sufficient to prepare the foster parents of New Hampshire to meet the demands of caring for the children placed in their homes. “Positive pre-training experiences have been found to relate to foster parents’ increased awareness and understanding of parenting issues…and an increased likelihood of retention in the child welfare system” (Rork & McNeil, 2011).

Foster parent training researchers, Christianson and McMurty (2009) indicate that “30-50% of foster families discontinue service each year due to lack of resources…and training.” “Resolving the problems of shortages and misdistribution of foster family homes requires identifying the current problems in both recruitment and retention of foster parents” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1992, p.iv).

In 2009, NHDCYF began making radical changes in how it worked with the families in which there was a finding of abuse and neglect, including when it was deemed necessary to remove a child either temporarily or permanently from the home. The Division instituted a revised practice model as stated in *Beliefs and Guiding Principles* that reflect changes in federal law. NHDCYF *Beliefs and Guiding Principles* state that placement “permanency begins with the goal of maintaining children with their families, followed by reunification, adoption, guardianship or other permanent planned living arrangement” (NHDCYF, 2011). The *Beliefs and Guiding Principles* also state that, “We [DCYF] remove children from their homes only when necessary” (NHDCYF, 2011). Once the option of maintaining a child within their home of origin ceases to be a viable reality, the state turns to foster parents as the next viable resource to ensure the physical and emotional stability of a child in need of placement.

The current practice model of the State of New Hampshire also requires that foster parents not only be adequately trained to care for the needs of a child suffering from maltreatment, but that the very people who have opened their homes to provide a safe haven for a child also agree to assist the state in working with the child’s parent(s) to enhance the possibility of that child being reunified with their parents in the not so distant future (New Hampshire Foster Parent Licensing Regulations, 2006). As child welfare agencies across the country work harder toward keeping children with their birth families, this practice helps to ensure that children are only removed from parents the state has determined to be a threat to the overall well-being and safety of that child. As a result of this shift in practice, “it is possible that only children from the most troubled families, or with the most difficult behavior problems, are entering foster care” (Price et al, 2008).

“When foster parents cannot care for these children effectively, they end up moving from foster home to foster home (and eventually to more restrictive and costly settings), with their behavior worsening, making it less likely that the next foster parent will be effective in being able to maintain them in their home particularly without the needed training to do so” (Dorsey, Farmer, Barth, Greene, Reid & Landsverk, 2008).

“One of the most frequently cited explanations for a failed foster placement is the inability of the foster parent(s) to manage child behavior problems” (Holland & Gorey, 2004; James, 2004; Brown & Bednar, 2006 as qtd. in Price, Chamberlain, Landsverk & Reid, 2009, p. 234). “Researchers have found that placement disruptions are often the result of, and have contributed to increased levels of psychosocial difficulties in foster children” (e.g., Barber & Delfaboro, 2002; Newton, Litrownik & Landverk, 2000 as qtd. in Rork & McNeil, 2011). A foster parent must “accept the temporary nature of foster placement and the likelihood that the child in care will, pursuant to the child’s case plan, return to his/her parents or be placed in a permanent placement” ( NH Foster Family Licensing Requirements, 2006, p.6).

According to Price, Chamberlain et al (2008), legislative initiatives such as the Child Welfare Act and Adoption Safe Families Act of 1997 (Public Law 105:89), have led child welfare agencies to place greater emphasis on shorter lengths of stay in foster care and greater placement stability. “This approach is based on the concept that an empowering, strengths-based parent and caseworker relationship is central to maintaining parents’ engagement in services and the belief that continued engagement will propel parents toward success (that is reunification; for example, Maluccio,1981;Zamosky, Sparks, Hatt & Sharman, 1993 as qtd. in Alpert & Britner, 2009).

“Given the high proportion of children in foster care evidencing behavior problems, it is likely that most foster parents will encounter a child with challenging behavior”(Price, Chamberlain et al, 2009). “Research has shown the potential for foster parent training to support placement stability, although effective trainings appear to be those that target factors related to disruptions, such as learning effective skills in child behavior management” (Boyd & Remy, 1978; Chamberlain, et al, 2006; Dorsey et al., 2008 as qtd. in Blakely, 2012.)

The other part of the foster parent training equation in New Hampshire which needs to be examined is adoption. As private adoption becomes increasingly expensive, parents seeking to adopt are frequently completing the exact same training as foster parents, and parents, who began as foster parents, have proceeded with the adoption process and have gone on to legally adopt their former child in care as part of their permanent family structure (personal communication, NH Foster Care Specialist, April 25, 2012).

As it is likely that any child entering the child welfare system has experienced some form of trauma as a result of abuse and neglect, it is imperative that potential foster and adoptive parents be prepared as “these children tend to be more behaviorally challenging as well as emotionally and psychologically disturbed “ ( Barbell & Wright, 1999; Isomaki, 2002, as qtd. in Broady, Stoyles, McMullen, Caputi, & Crittenden, 2010, p.561). “Addressing the social and emotional elements of functioning for children in foster care can even improve permanency outcomes” (Administration for Children and Families, 2012, p. 11).

An evaluation process which goes beyond a simplistic outcome based evidence based practice theory of program evaluation may be able to determine if the *FACES* training program contributes to the desired outcome that “children [will] spend less time in foster care before exiting to reunification, adoption, or guardianship, and reentries into foster care may become less common” (Administration for Children, Youth & Families, 2012, p. 11). “In other words, policymakers, supervisors, and foster parent training providers must all be on the same page in developing and maintaining, and evaluating these programs in order for the programs to be truly effective”(Rork & McNeil, 2011, p. 165). In order to reach to ultimate goal of “social betterment”, it is necessary to not only examine the evidence based practice of positive outcomes regarding permanency of placement for individual children, but also to evaluate the “value” of training to all stakeholders.

**Methodology**

**CEIF Step # 2** (Woodland & Hutton, 2012):

The next step in the evaluation process involved meetings between the evaluand and the evaluator to identify and map out communities of practice: NHDCYF selected four District Offices to serve as the sample districts for the state. Two rural: Littleton and Claremont, New Hampshire; two with an urban center as well as rural communities contained within the respective service areas: Keene and Laconia, New Hampshire. It was mutually agreed between the evaluand and the evaluator that interviewing resource parents throughout the state would require a substantial amount of time for the study, far beyond the capacity of one evaluator.

A sample group of primary stakeholders, including staff and resource parents from the four District Offices were selected to participate in the study: Foster Program Resource Workers, the staff responsible for matching and connecting children who have come into state care with resource families; the Permanency Workers, the staff who work with families to transition a child in care to reunification with birth parents, adoption, or long-term placement if reunification and/or adoption are not viable options; District Office supervisors, including the Head Supervisors, Assistant Supervisors; the Foster Parent Program Supervisor for the state; and Resource Parents who agreed to participate in the study.

**CEIF Step #3**: Monitor stage(s) of development (Woodland & Hutton, 2012).

Participants in *FACES* classes in the four geographic areas were administered a Pre-*FACES* Survey prior to participating in class as to their motivation in taking the training. Demographic information was collected as well. Upon completion of the *FACES* curriculum, participants were asked to complete a Post-*FACES* Survey that again addressed motivation, whether or not they planned to move forward to become licensed, and if they felt the training had prepared them to become resource parents. In addition to collecting data through the surveys, two separate but overlapping sets of face to face interview questions were developed to collect data from the identified primary stakeholders.

**Limitations**

During the initial phases of the evolving study design, the evaluator and the evaluand intended to interview only newly licensed resource parents who had the experience of taking a newly revised and updated *FACES.* As the evaluator connected with the four individual offices involved in the evaluation for contact information on newly licensed resource parents, it was apparent that newly licensed resource parents who had a child currently placed in their home were in the single numbers across all four districts. The initial intent to interview only new foster parents was revised to include veteran resource parents. Neither the evaluator nor the evaluand believed the small sample group of newly licensed resource parents would provide a sufficient sample.

As all information about resource families and children in state care is highly confidential, the team chose to have the Resource Worker in each office identify potential study participants. The Resource Workers contacted families in their individual regions to explain the study and to seek preliminary permission for possible participation. The evaluator was provided with the names and contact information for each potential participant who expressed a willingness to participate in the evaluation. The inherent limitations which need to be acknowledged from this method of participant selection is that rather than being a random sample, individual resource parents were first selected through an attempt on the Resource Workers part to provide a diverse pool consisting of recently licensed and veteran resource parents. Despite initial concerns on the evaluator’s part that the individual selection method would produce a slanting of the study in some yet undetermined direction, the actual results of the evaluation dispelled this concern.

During preliminary meetings with the NHDCYF administrative stakeholders as the evaluator gathered information and knowledge necessary to design the study, it became apparent that one group of significant stakeholders was omitted from the identified members of the community of practice—the child protection social workers (CPSWs), who work directly with the child and family in the home throughout any placement. The evaluator did not come to understand the significance of a resource parent’s relationship to this level of staff and how it may positively or negatively impact upon their overall resource parent experience until well into the study. A question concerning the resource parent’s experience with NHDCYF was included in the interview, which compensated for the omission of CPSWs in the original design plan. The evaluator did interview one CPSW from one district office at the conclusion of the study. In data collected from interviews with Resource Parents, which will be discussed a greater length in the result section, it was clear that Resource Parents do not differentiate between the specific duties of NHDCYF staff, nor are the majority of Resource Parents aware of the diverging set of duties for each staff. For this reason, upon analyzing the totality of the data, the omission of including CPSWs in the evaluation from each district office did not have a negative impact upon the breadth of the evaluation or individual resource parents’ analysis of their own experience with NHDCYF.

**Purpose of the Study**

1. Determine if commonalities exist in the personal motivations of individuals seeking to become licensed caregivers.
2. To ascertain if resource parents feel that the *FACES* (**F**oster and **A**doptive **C**are **E**ssentialS) training program adequately prepares them to have a child placed in their home.
3. To determine if there a correlation between positive placement outcomes and the amount of training that people receive to become licensed caregivers through the state foster parent program.
4. To see if the evaluation’s results support increasing the *FACES* training hours to include, for example, an advanced trauma course, a deeper investigation of shared parenting, and/or required courses for families seeking adoption, etc.

**Interview questions for face to face interviews with resource parents**:

1)What was your motivation in becoming a licensed resource parent?

2) Do you feel that the FACES curriculum adequately prepared you to meet the needs of the child in your home feel?

3) if not, what information would help you to feel more prepared to meet the needs of this child?

4) What is the age of the child in your care?

(6)What is your age, education, and experience parenting?

7) What is your family’s level of involvement with the child’s birth family?

8) How does your family feel about shared parenting?

9) How do you regard the child’s place within your current family structure?

10) Now that you have a child, what type of additional training do you feel would be beneficial?

11) What do you perceive as the possible outcome of this particular child in you care?

12) Do you feel that DCYF has been responsive in meeting the needs of your family and child?

13) If not, what type of support do you need?

14) Is there anything else you would like to share relative to training and support?

**Questions for NHDCYF staff stakeholders:**

1) What do you think motivates individuals to become licensed resource parents?

2) Do you feel that the FACES curriculum adequately prepares resource parents to meet the need of the child in their home?

3) If not, what information do you think would serve to more thoroughly prepare a resource parent to meet the needs of children in their care?

A total of 23 resource parents, representing 17 homes, were interviewed across the four districts. The sample pool of resource parents was comprised of 20 foster parents, including 5 parents who had adopted children that they had fostered, and 3 additional parents were awaiting adoptions of children they were fostering to become final; 1 relative caregiver, who adopted her grandchild; and 2 respite parents, who had been providing solely respite care for over 10 years.

Fifteen staff members were interviewed across the four district offices: 3 District Office supervisors; 4 Assistant Supervisors; 4 Resource Workers; 2 Permanency Workers; 1 Child Protection Social Worker (CPSW); 1 Independent Service Organization (ISO) Foster Care Specialist (ISO’s are independent social service agencies who also recruit and manage foster cases in conjunction with the state.)

**Results**

**CEIF Step # 4**: the evaluator assesses levels of integration including interorganization and intraorganization overlapping structures (Woodland & Hutton, 2012) and determines how the levels of connectivity or gaps thereof influence the probability of achieving the intended outcomes at multiple levels of overlapping connectivity. Step #4 of CEIF, applied to data collection and analysis, has direct utility in highlighting strengths as well of areas in need of improvement across the system.

The overarching goal of NHDCYF is to ensure the safety and overall well-being of children who have suffered abuse and neglect. A necessary component of the child welfare system includes providing children in care with a safe, normal, and nurturing home life while the agency simultaneously works directly with parents/relatives and/or resource parents to move towards a timely, permanent, and successful outcome for each child. Understanding where the various components of the child welfare system work successfully, or are in need of improvement, provides valuable information in assessing how the child welfare system of New Hampshire may improve the resource parent program.

**Results of Data Collection**

**Face to Face Interviews Resource Parent Demographics**

**Age: Highest level of Education:**

**6: 25-35 10: High School Diploma**

**8: 36-45 8: Bachelor’s Degree**

**9: 46-55 4: Master’s Degree**

**1: Advanced Professional Degree**

**Results of Parenting Experience**- defined as parenting experience with their own biological children including professional experience with children inclusive of parenting previous foster or adoptive children in their care.

**Extensive**-qualified as having parented three or more children prior to becoming a resource parent.

**Moderate**-qualified as having parented two or more children prior to becoming a resource parent.

**Little**-qualified as having parented one child prior to becoming a resource parent.

**No previous experience**-qualified as having little to no previous experience parenting children prior to becoming a resource parent.

**Extensive Parenting Experience**: 13 Resource Parents

**Moderate Parenting Experience**: 5 Resource Parents

**Little Parenting Experience**: 4 Resource Parents

**No Previous Parenting Experience**: 1 Resource Parent

**Age of children in their care** at the time of the study – Total of 32 children:

**Results**:

Infants (18 months or younger): 2

Pre-school: (19 months – 4 years): 11

Elementary: (Kindergarten-4th grade): 7

Middle School: (5th-8th grade): 1

High School: (9th-12th grade): 11

Three families were awaiting adoptions in progress to clear through the court system, and four had adopted previous foster children. One family was in hopes that future children in their care would be available for adoption.

**1) What was your motivation in becoming a licensed resource parent?**

**Results**:

Needed to become licensed to adopt grandchild – 1

Wanted to help a child in need- 22

Had been in foster care themselves -2

Their parents had been foster parents when they were growing up: 2

Professional experience placed them in contact with children in need: 3

Believed helping children in need was part of their Christian faith: 4

Fostered as a means to adopt a child that they wished to now become part of their family: 8

Infertility: to become a resource parent in hopes of adopting children to complete their own family: 1.

2**) Do you feel that the FACES curriculum adequately prepared you to meet the needs of the child in your home feel?**

Two resource parents stated it was a means to an end and was too basic. “I knew it all from experience and my own professional background” (NH Resource parent, 2013).

Five resource parents stated *FACES* prepared them well. “FACES was well structured and helps to put you in the mindset to have children in your home” (NH Resource parent, 2013).

Two resource parents stated *FACES* is excellent preparation for respite care, but more training is needed for parents seeking long-term placement.

Fourteen resource parents stated that *FACES* is a good starting point, but that they now know from experience that they needed more training to be adequately prepared to meet the needs of children in their homes. “*FACES* was very good preparation, but I think training beyond it should be individualized for specific children and family needs” (NH Resource parent, 2013).

**3) If not, what information would help you to feel more prepared to meet the needs of this child?**

-Number 1 response-95%: Advanced training in understanding the effects of trauma on a child, how dealing with the reality of trauma affects the resource family as individuals, and how they, as resource parents, can help the child recover from the effects of trauma if possible.

-Number Two response-90%: A follow-up course after becoming licensed on understanding the child welfare system and how it operates and instructions and advice on how to effectively navigate the system, including the court system and the role of resource parents in that process. Every parent who brought this up, 22 out of 23, indicated that this course should include a review of state Foster Care Regulations, including a review of the legal responsibilities and limits of a resource parent in parenting children whose parents retain parental rights.

-Number Three response (a)-85%: Advanced courses on anger management and attachment disorders. (b)-85%: Upper level courses on dealing with the grief, loss, and heartbreak when the child is reunified with the birth parents.

-Number Four Response-80%: Advanced courses on Special Education: understanding Individual Education Plans (IEPs); how to advocate for the child as a resource parent; assisting the birth parent in understanding their role in the development and execution of IEPs; specialized courses in various disorders such as Attention Deficit Disorder, Oppositional Defiance Disorder, Autism, etc. and how the resource parent may best assist the child both in school and within the family context.

The following responses were equally represented throughout the sample group with 50% of the resource parents interviewed requesting the following information:

1. Advanced courses in coping with mental health issues and disorders in children and adults.
2. Advanced courses on substance abuse amongst middle schoolers, teens, and adults: how to recognize the symptoms and what resources are available for treatment.
3. A regionalized information resource on where resource parents can find clothes, diapers, access reduced fees for sports and equipment and activities, scholarships for general school participation and camp experiences, etc. Veteran resource parents have found resources for free goods and clothing for children in care and believe this knowledge is crucial information for new foster parents.

**Involvement with birth parents or extended family**:

All parents reported deliberate and sustained involvement with their child’s and/or children’s birth family.

**How do you feel about shared parenting between yourself and your child’s birth parents?**

All resource parents reported successful efforts to develop an on-going relationships with birth parents as they helped the parents work toward reunification with the child or attempted to maintain a consistent relationship with birth parents even if the probable outcome was the resource parent’s adoption of the child. Resource parents working with birth parents toward reunification frequently reported providing and participating in shared family experiences such outings, family celebrations, and meals to provide opportunities for children and their parents to have normalized and sustained contact. The majority of resource parents reported that they work to maintain contact with former foster children and their parents, and in many cases, continued to share parenting experiences through overnight visits, shared holiday celebrations, etc.

**How do you perceive the child in your family structure?**

All resource parents reported that they believed the child to be part of their family and treated them as if they were their own child even if they were also working toward reunification with the birth parents.

**Do you feel that DCYF has been responsive in meeting the needs of your family and child?**

The resource parents’ responses ultimately broke down into two major categories:

Communication: The level of perceived customer service provided by the district office by individual resource parents was in direct correlation to the level of communication between the resource parent and the local district office. The factors influencing the resource parents’ perception of the quality of communication was dependent upon the timeliness of communication, i.e. did the Resource Worker or the CPSW return their calls, emails, texts promptly, either through a timely response or an in person visit. The usefulness of information conveyed in responses influenced resource parent perception of effective communication as well, i.e. the response did or did not address the initial concern or question and whether the information relayed was appropriate to the initial concern or useful.

Reports on the reliability of communication between resource parents varied depending upon which district office their child had been placed through. Resource parents who lived in and were licensed in one district office but had children in their care placed by another district office in the state, consistently reported ongoing issues with communication and support from the district office outside of the district office in which they were licensed. 50% of resource parents interviewed reported that the level of communication with their local district office was fully responsive. 50% of resource parents reported they did not perceive the local office to be timely responsive to their needs nor to have adequately addressed their needs in a useful manner.

The second factor in resource parents’ assessment of their experience with NHDCYF involved the level of support the resource parent(s) felt they received from the local district office. This perception involved information on resources to meet the needs of the child in their care, information on what was occurring with the child such as court dates, appointments, visitation with birth parents or other relatives. Individual perception also involved the quality and quantity of communication, i.e. explanations and information as to why a particular event was or was not transpiring.

Resource parents who expressed satisfaction reported that their inquiries and needs were responded to in a timely manner and a culture existed in which explanations and information were also openly exchanged between the resource parents and the various staff members of the district offices.

**If not, what type of support do you need?**

In addition to the above requests, 100% of resource parentsinterviewed expressed the need for district office staff to consider resource parents’ work and life schedule when scheduling appointments for the child and/or visitation with the birth parents. Resource parents who are simultaneously fostering children of different families were particularly vocal in relating the degree of stress that meeting the multiple demands of different caseworkers who often scheduled visitation and appointments when it was convenient for the caseworker or the birth parent without factoring in the life and work demands of the resource parent.

Resource parents who expressed a high level of satisfaction with their experience with NHDCYF believed that the district office staff understood and provided support for the unique emotional demands that being a resource parent exacts, which included being perceived as a valued resource and advocate for the child in care. Resource parents who expressed high levels of satisfaction with district office staff perceived themselves to be a valued partner of NHDCYF in providing safe and nurturing homes for children in care.

**Face to Face Interview Responses of District Office staff:**

100% of the 4 district offices staff unanimously concurred that the *FACES* initial training provides a solid foundation as a means to begin educating future licensed resource parents, but to more effectively prepare individuals to parent and nurture children in care, state Foster Parent Regulations need to be revised to include mandatory levels of additional training. District office staff 100% concurred that the *FACES* training served a dual and equally significant purpose by providing information to potential foster and/or adoptive parents who self-select not to go through the process of becoming licensed.

**Composite of FACES Pre & Post Survey Results:**

Of the 109 course participants surveyed, 53 indicated their primary objective in becoming licensed was to provide foster care; 43 respondents indicated their primary objective was to adopt; 3 individuals sought to become licensed only to provide respite care; and the remaining 10 were relative caregivers seeking to become licensed in order to meet state requirements to foster and/or adopt a relative child.

**Conclusions and Implications**

**CEIF Step #5** (Woodland & Hutton, 2012): assess cycles of inquiry in which the

evaluator and the evaluand analyze quantitative and qualitative data to make collaborative decisions to achieve mutual goals (p. 368).

Throughout the Fostering Success evaluation study, the evaluator shared and conferred with NHDCYF staff on the findings and implications of the study. For example, well before the conclusion of the face to face interviews the Pre & Post FACES Surveys of course participants were concluded and served to support the considerations of NHDCYF to develop a revised resource family recruitment campaign which addresses the motivation of families to adopt, as well as addressing the needs of the state to provide a sufficient number foster homes.

This analysis is in turn supported by an analysis of the demographic information of the licensed resource parents face to face study participants. The results are in direct correlation with the results of the *FACES* Training Surveys. Approximately 35% of licensed parents in the study have adopted children in their care or are in the process of adopting, and 4% are hoping to adopt children in the future, totaling 39%. Approximately 40% of the prospective foster or adoptive parents identify themselves as seeking to adopt children that they may foster. A comparison of the results of the survey to the actual experience of current resource parents supports the need for NHDCYF to reassess current efforts targeted to attract and recruit future foster and/or adoptive parents.

The staff interviewed in the four district offices in the study unanimously concurred that additional advanced mandatory training for current and future resource parents has the capacity to improve outcomes and assist resource parents in more effectively meeting the diverse needs of children in their care. The requests and acknowledgement of the interviewed resource parents of the need for additional training correlates with anecdotal observations and opinions of staff in the field. The only significant difference in the request for specific content and types of training between resource parents and NHDCYF staff was the request from resource parents for a more detailed training on understanding and navigating the child welfare system.

The results of the evaluation support NHDCYF staff recommendations for revisions of state Foster Care Regulations to ensure that resource parents complete additional mandatory training beyond the initial FACES training. As the collaborative team continues to analyze and interpret data collected from the study, the team will continue to evaluate how to improve outcomes for children in care by more effectively educating and preparing resource parents.

The results of the evaluation also reveal the sine qua non of three intersecting and equally important aspects of the perceived success of individual resource parents’ experience in parenting the children in their care: 1) the level of preparedness of individual parents is directly influenced by the level of training they have received to meet the specific needs of the child in their home; 2) their own level of professional or personal experience in parenting children, which is interrelated to the need and type of additional training a specific parent may require; 3) the degree to which they believe they are a valued partner with NHDCYF staff in caring for the child, which includes timely and appropriately responsive communication between the staff and parents. The symbiotic relationship of these factors serves the sense of a “shared purpose” and continuing need for extensive and examined levels of collaboration between the intersecting systems.

In response to Scriven’s (2012) advice to evaluators that we must consider the “value” of a particular program under evaluation. The results of the Fostering Success evaluation support this consideration as the majority of stakeholders perceive the *FACES* training as a valued starting point in preparation to become a licensed resource parent in the State of New Hampshire. It is also clear that 100% of the respondents value the program the state has created through the Education and Training Partnership to continue their education.

Anecdotal reports from resource parents support this conclusion:

I think that every foster parent should have to take *Conflict and Anger Management.*

It was a total eye-opener. I can’t tell you how much of a positive impact that taking

this course has had upon the way that I interact with my foster daughter. It has

helped me to really understand not only how she may be reacting, but how the way

I was reacting to her was actually contributing to make things worse. Now things

are so much better” (NH Resource parent, 2013).

“I hate to admit it, but my husband and I just did not know what to do with our

daughter when she first came to us as a foster child. We actually called the DO

and asked to have them take her back. We couldn’t handle her. Then I took

*Attachment Disorders* and the light bulbs went off! Now I understood what

had been happening with our daughter. I called the Resource Worker and asked

if she was still in care, and she told me that our daughter had just experienced

another failed placement and was in need of a home. I explained what I had

learned and asked to have her back again. She came back into our home and

we adopted her a year later. This never would have happened if we had not

taken that class and understood what was happening with her” (NH Resource Parent, 2013).

The above quotes represent the majority of qualitative responses from resource parents throughout the study. The results serve to support the analysis that additional advanced training has the potential to directly impact the probability of positive outcomes for resource families and children in their care. It also validates the value that stakeholders place upon education and training to achieve that end.

As the data analyses of the Fostering Success evaluation continues, the team will need to assess the utility of applying Kirkpatricks’ Learning and Training (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2006) theory to the experience of resource parents in the field. It is recommended that an alternate means of assessing the transfer of learning from training to direct application within the family system, which includes methods of reinforcement of learning, be considered before attempting to apply Kirkpatricks’ method. The team may conclude that other assessment tools such as Bloom’s Revised Taxonomy, or the Structure of Observed Learning Outcome (SOLO) (Clark, 2013), may be a more appropriate tool for assessing resource parents’ application of training knowledge. \

The results of the study also reveal the need for additional training of NHDCYF staff to create a more uniform level of support for resource parents. Improving the consistency and reliability of communication between staff and resource parents has the capacity to positively and directly influence the overall experience of individual families. The results of the study support the conclusion that addressing how individual factors of education, parenting experience, and a parent’s perceived support of district office staff work together to contribute to the overall experience and ability of individual resource parents to meet the needs of children in their care.

Improving the potential for consistent outcomes achieves “the ultimate goal…[of] what evaluators refer to as social betterment” (Mark et al, 2000 & Weiss, 1998, as qtd. in Julnes, 2012) Understanding the totality of resource parents needs and experience goes far to achieve this end.

**Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to research, authorship, and/or publication of this paper.

**Funding**

This evaluation was financed under an agreement with the State of New Hampshire, Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Children, Youth, and Families, with funds provided in part or in whole by the State of New Hampshire and/or the United States Department of Health and Human Services.

**Institutional Review Board**

The Institutional Review Boards at Granite State College, Concord, NH and Plymouth State University, Plymouth, NH approved the IRB #: Fall\_0012\_2012 granting permission for the author to conduct the research necessary to complete this project. The author is certified through the NIH, certificate number #476793, to conduct research on human subjects. All participants in the study signed a Consent to Participate in Research form and were fully informed of the parameters of the study.

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