

Research

From Their Hearts to Our Ears: Former Wards in Rural Communities Discuss Permanency

Shonda Lawrence, PhD

Jacksonville State University

Abstract

Using qualitative methods, this study explored the understanding of “permanency,” “best interest of the child” and beliefs of the former wards of the Southern Illinois child welfare system. Analyses revealed consensus among the participants’ understanding of permanency and best interest of child. The study’s findings suggested a need for better collaboration between all parties (judges, attorneys, caseworkers, etc.) in permanency planning for children involved in the child welfare system.

Introduction

The child welfare system provides temporary living arrangements for abused and neglected minor children. This provision is most commonly known as foster care. Children of parents who are unable or unwilling to provide basic necessities in a safe environment are removed from their homes and designated as wards of the state. They are placed in foster homes until such time that the parents can demonstrate minimal parenting skills, adequate housing, sufficient income, sobriety, mental stability, etc. The system exists to protect society’s most vulnerable population, its children.

The foster care system acts as a safety net for this population of vulnerable children (Barth, 2000; Triseliotis, 2002). The goal of the system is to restore families and improve permanency outcomes for children. However, statistics do not support the efforts of the system. Less than fifty percent of children in foster care are reunited with their biological families nationally (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2002). Further, Lawrence, Carlson, and Egeland’s (2006) study suggests that children who have been abused or neglected and subsequently placed in foster homes away from their biological families are surprisingly at a higher risk for behavioral and emotional problems. This goes against the commonly held assumption that children would fare better if they are protected from abuse and neglect and placed in environments where they can thrive emotionally, physically and mentally.

Although permanency rates for children in foster care in Illinois have increased over the past few years (ICDFS, 2006), there has been a statewide initiative to do more to address permanency and reunification for children in foster care. The initiative aims to address the

discrepancies in permanency rates statewide. Although the number of out-of-home child cases decreased by 15.5 % statewide from fiscal year 2003 to fiscal year 2006, there was an increase of 9.01% in downstate Illinois for the same period (IDCFS, 2006).

It is important to involve those most impacted by systemic decisions as we continue to examine permanency in the Southern Region of Illinois. The Southern Region of Illinois comprises the southern third of the state. The area has a population of approximately 1.2 million and includes the cities of Alton, Belleville, Carbondale, Centralia, Collinsville, Edwardsville, O'Fallon, Mount Vernon, and Marion. The Southern Region of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (IDCFS) provides foster care services for over 20,000 children each year (IDCFS, 2016; Mississippi Department of Human Services Division of Family and Children's Services [MDHS], 2013).

Those individuals who, as children, were a part of the system due to neglect or abuse have a wealth of knowledge that could be helpful in assisting the state in addressing issues related to barriers to permanency. The Southern Region of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (IDCFS) in conjunction with the Illinois African-American Family Commission (IAAFC), Illinois State University (ISU), Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville and the IDCFS Divisions of the African-American Advisory Council (African-American Affairs and Training) gathered information from several focus groups to identify and assess barriers to permanency in the Southern Region of Illinois. Results of the research were reported in a "Southern Region Permanency Enhancement Symposium" held August 23, 2007 at Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville, in Edwardsville, Illinois. The results from one focus group are presented in this paper.

Methodology

This cross-sectional research study primarily utilized qualitative methods to collect and analyze data. Data were collected from a focus group consisting of adults who were wards of the State of Illinois. The Illinois Department of Children and Family Services and Illinois African American Family Commission identified potential study participants in the Southern Region of Illinois. Names and addresses of potential subjects were made available to the investigators after permission to release this information was secured by the IDCFS. The potential subjects received invitational letters asking that they participate in a focus group. Participants were asked to complete a demographic survey, designed specifically for this study. Participants were also asked to participate in a discussion facilitated by investigators of Southern Illinois University – Edwardsville. Participants responded to the following questions:

1. What does the term "permanency" mean to you?
2. What does the term "best interest of the child" mean to you?

3. What are the three most important things that judges, attorneys, caseworkers, and others in the child welfare system should think about before making a final decision about a child's future?

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (version 17.0) was used to numerically describe the participants. Interval and nominal level data was collected to obtain descriptive data and measures. Frequency distribution, mean, and range were used at the univariate level to examine the distribution of the variables in the study that describe the subjects. Audio taped responses were orthographically transcribed and then qualitatively analyzed. Patterns and themes were identified as they emerged in the data.

Participant Descriptions – Demographics of Former Wards

Seven people participated in the Former Wards Focus Group. The racial distribution of the group is White/Caucasian (100%). Their ages range from 18 to 45 with a mean age of 34 years. All of the participants indicated that they were from rural areas. Eighty-six percent described their city/town as small and 14% described their town as mid-size. The participants reported a range of two to four siblings in the foster care system with a mean of three siblings. The number of years the participants were in the DCFS system range from six to 20 years with a mean of 9.42 years. Six of the seven participants were never returned home to their birth parent. One participant indicated that he/she was returned home. Another was returned home twice, but eventually ended up back in the foster care system. Three of the participants were adopted. Five of the participants indicated that two or more of their siblings were adopted. At the time of the focus group, four of the participants indicated that they were parents and had never been involved with DCFS for neglect or abuse.

Qualitative Findings – Focus Group Discussion

Definition of Permanency

Participants were asked what the term “permanency” meant to them. The group defined permanency as a stable, loving environment for the child to grow, feel safe and obtain their basic needs. While there seemed to be general consensus on the definition of permanency, some differences can be seen within personal experiences. Although some participants indicated that they had periods of extended placements (one as long as six years), all point to the uneasiness of not knowing if he/she would be removed. The following are excerpts of individual responses:

1. “To me it means being able to stay in that same home and knowing where you’re going to lay your head every night.”
2. “Where you’re going to wake up in the morning.”
3. “Where you’re going to be, I was fortunate enough to stay in the same foster home for six years, yet I saw foster children come and go that have been in five or six foster homes in

- a year. And they never had that permanency that I felt I had. That I knew I was going to be there.”
4. “So the permanency to me would be to know what to expect and where you’re going to be day to day.”
 5. “Your own bed, a couple meals a day, someone who’s always going to be there if you need it... You gotta know that you’re safe.”
 6. “Now I think that’s what permanency is to a child because you want to belong somewhere. You want a family. And that should be a permanency. Having a Mom and Dad. Having your own room and your own stuff.”
 7. “You don’t want to have to be sixteen years old and having to explain to your friends why you don’t have a permanent home – why you’re moving school to school. That was my problem as a child. I was always by myself.. Always, on the outside looking in – looking at the other kids with their families and thinking - Is that what a family supposed to look like? You never knew... So I didn’t know permanency until the day I was adopted and it took four years.”

Definition of Best Interest

According to the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services Rule 315, “Best interest of the child” has been defined by law to include the following factors:

- *the physical safety and welfare of the child, including food, shelter, health, and clothing;*
- *the development of the child’s identity;*
- *the child’s background and ties, including familial and religious;*
- *the child’s sense of attachments, including: where the child actually feels love, attachment, and a sense of being valued (as opposed to where adults believe the child should feel such love, attachment, and a sense of being valued);*
- *the child’s sense of security;*
- *the child’s sense of familiarity;*
- *continuity of affection for the child;*
- *the least disruptive placement alternative for the child;*
- *the child’s wishes and long-term goals;*
- *the child’s community ties, including church, school, and friends;*
- *the child’s need for permanence which includes the child’s need for stability and continuity of relationships with parent figures and with siblings and other relatives;*
- *the uniqueness of every family and child;*
- *the risks attendant to entering and being in substitute care; and the preferences of the persons available to care for the child. [705 ILCS 405/1-3]*

Participants were asked what the term “best interest of the child” meant to them. Overall, “best interest of the child” was described by the participants as a stable

environment for children. Understandably, the group did not distinguish between the terms “best interest” and “permanency” rather the terms were used interchangeably. These terms are often used in this manner by persons outside of the court system i.e. birth parents, wards, and foster parents, while court personnel and law enforcement often distinguish between the two by policy, laws, and statutes. Response excerpts were:

1. “Listen to the child regardless of age- ask them their option”;
2. “Get the full story”;
3. “Recognize siblings need to be together”;
4. “System failed us by taking away the caretaker ‘me’”;
5. “Let the child talk about their situation and what really matters, they tell you not to worry about each other they are in good foster homes”; and
6. “Re-evaluate the situation before making a decision.”
7. “I would say um...best interest would be whatever makes that child learn and grow and keep them out of danger.”

Priorities Related to Permanency Planning

Focus group participants were asked what they thought were the three most important things that judges, attorneys, and others should think about before making a final decision about a child’s future. The participants were very adamant about their feelings. They were all in agreement that the child’s needs, wants, and experiences need to be taken into consideration. They were also concerned with the separation of siblings and the safety and quality of foster homes. Representative responses are as follows:

Child Needs/Wants/Experiences

1. “What your real need is. What the child’s need is. To me, I felt like even at twelve years old I knew what I needed, and what, what I needed from the system, what I needed from the case worker, from the judge, from, you know, the attorney that was there supposed to be in my best interest. But I didn’t always feel like they were looking at what was best for me as the child, so I think even asking the child what need, instead of an adult taking it upon themselves to look at what they think the child needs. Because honestly, what...as an adult, what we think a child needs may be completely different than what their real need is. We may look at a child that’s been neglected and abused and think that their need is to deal with the issue of their abuse when that might not be what their issue is that they truly need to deal with at that time. I think there were too many people when I was a child looking at what they thought I needed to get from them instead of what I really needed. And I thought at twelve years old I could express to them what my needs were but I didn’t feel like they were listening or that they were asking, and that when I did tell them, I was hushed so that they as adults could figure out what I needed. And being the oldest, and, being twelve, I felt like I was already making decisions for younger siblings and

- taking care of things and I didn't do well with someone telling me what I needed to do and what my needs were. I wanted to be able to tell them what I needed from them."
2. "They would ask you a question but they really weren't listening. You could see their eyes glaze over, because they already knew what they wanted to hear from you. They just wanted you to feel like you were being heard but you really weren't....they didn't expect that you were intelligent or had enough experience to actually evaluate the situation when I think that we evaluated it probably better than they did."
 3. "Everyone thinks they're going to fix this, you know, okay, we're going to fix you. We're going to make this all better."
 4. "If you're someone who grew up again in a quote normal family, you can read all you want, you can study all you want, you can watch all the movies you want...but you can never understand...until you live through it. You know, it was normal for us. It was no big deal for our mom and step dad to disappear for four or five days. It wasn't a big deal...we changed the baby, we fed the baby... all the sudden now all these other people are making the decisions for you."
 5. "I think there were some things that were just you didn't talk about, you kept hush, and I think just letting the child talk about and find out what their true issues were. To me, my true issue was us staying together. And doing anything possible to stay together, and everyone else's true issue, for me was that I go to school."
 6. "So never mind the wishes of us five children. But the parents have rights. Where are the children's rights?" "It comes back to you listening to what the child's needs and wants are and investigating whether these family members would have been fit like you said to take care of me instead of going back to these parent rights. I mean, that's what still just got me so much after...the parent had the right to this and that and to me, at twelve years old, I was their parent and what rights did I have?"
 7. "I knew what was best for me and I wanted them to see that, but they didn't listen to me and it took a year and a half before anything was said about it."

Separation of Siblings

1. "Don't separate them. Don't make them feel like they have a mental illness or they're wrong because they were dependent upon each other and because they have been placed in that role. Don't then tell them that they are no longer in charge."
2. "And no one took into account that what was important to me was protecting my sisters. I could a cared less about being a kid. I could a cared less about living in a nice home. I mean, to me the little trailer court and trailer we were in was fine because we were all sisters and we were together."
3. "The priorities should be that they keep the kids together because the kids have depended on each other through all the trauma."

Safety and Quality of Foster Homes

1. “And for God’s sakes, some of the foster parents we have... how did they ever get licensed? And how did they keep a license... I talked to kids all the time, and they would stay in foster homes that were crappy because they were scared to death where they might go was even worse... They had left sexual abuse, well, now they’re only getting physical abuse, and that was better than the sexual abuse, so they would stay with the physical abuse rather than report it. Because they’d be afraid if they reported it, they’d go back to sexual abuse again. So sometimes it’s the lesser of many many evils ... You’ll take a little neglect. You’ll take a pop upside the head. You know, when the dude is drinking Friday night as opposed to the guy crawling in your bed.”
2. “I would rather be in a foster home because I felt protected even though the physical and emotional abuse was there.... It was better... Than getting raped... The devil you know is better than the devil you don’t know. And, and... I saw a lot.”

Inadequate Investigations

1. “I think that DCFS needs a better ... investigation.”
2. “That’s all I was going to say. It’s just a better investigation. They need to do better. DCFS didn’t step in. They didn’t take the case for... They were supposed to get the case Monday... over the weekend it happened... they were supposed to get the case Monday... but didn’t start doing nothing until about a month later.”

Recruitment and Oversight

1. “I was literally ignored by my caseworker and she maybe contacted me every six month and that was because she felt I was in a good home.... a safe home.... a foster home.... where I was going to hell. She did not advocate for me. She just separated me from my siblings.”

The Importance of Relationship Building with DCFS

1. “I actually was listened to every time I spoke to someone. Be it the judge, the caseworker, whoever, they actually listened to me ... they made sure I understand all of the different ramifications of whatever choices I was making. They allowed me to make the choices. Whenever I turned fifteen, my parent’s rights were going to be terminated. Plain and simple. I was actually given the choice of going home or staying in the system. If I stayed in the system, I could have chose to be adopted or I could have chose to go through as a ward of the state. And they explained everything, I made my choices, and that’s where I went. I credit that to a lot of people. I mean that was... the foster family, the judge. It wasn’t any one person. It was everybody. It was a team effort basically.”

Summary

The information gathered is useful in helping social workers and social service providers understand the emotional and psychological experiences of children in the child welfare system – most of whom, at the time of their removal, are too young or do not know how to verbalize how they feel. This study found that all of the former wards expressed despair around the rebuilding process of reconnecting with their siblings, feeling as though their emotional and psychological needs had not been met, and suffering from a negative impact on their psychosocial development as a result of being separated from their siblings on into adulthood. Apparent in the narratives were the emotional pains and sufferings that the former wards of the foster care system endured and continued to struggle with as a result of being separated from their siblings.

As evidenced in the knowledge base on consequences for children with foster care system involvement, outcomes should include the voice of children/adults who have been involved in the foster care system. The process of removing children from their homes and loved ones should be examined in order that sensitivity and care are apparent to the children being removed. Assessing the prevalence and nature of psychosocial issues among youth and young adults exiting the foster care system will provide evidence that can inform public and programmatic policies. Assessing how system policies, procedures and organizational culture impact the lives of the children it serves both short- and long-term, plays a vital role in determining best practices for child welfare policy and practice and social work education, practice and research regardless to geographical location.

Limitations

This study was conducted in Southern Illinois and all of the participants were from rural areas. Therefore, the findings of the study cannot be generalized to other populations experiencing out of home placement in other geographical areas. The study also included only seven participants of who all were white. Experiences by children of other races may not be the same. However, the results can assist other child welfare workers in developing and implementing interventions, policies and procedures, and trainings addressing the findings highlighted in this study. For example, The Modified Mississippi Settlement Agreement and Reform Plan (2007) resulting from the Olivia Y, et al vs. Phil Bryant, as governor of the State of Mississippi lawsuit requires the Mississippi Department of Human Services to “develop a broader and more geographically diverse array of mental health services available to foster children, develop and maintain sibling visitation, and place siblings entering placement at or near the same time together, with exceptions” (pp. 25-26, 40-41).

The findings of this study may assist in identification of issues that occur early on in a young person’s life and may be beneficial in improving mental health delivery for children involved in the foster care system. Preventive initiatives can reduce psychosocial developmental issues in this population by implementing improved foster care programming and developing

empirically informed interventions targeting children and youth in foster care at early stages of their development (Fowler, Toro, & Miles, 2009).

Future Research/Recommendations

This study provides a foundation for inquiry into the experiences of children served by the child welfare system. Research on outcomes for children involved in the child welfare system should include the voice of children who have been involved in the system. The process of removing children from their homes should be examined in order that sensitivity and care are apparent to the children being removed. The impact of being separated from siblings should also be examined. Strict qualifications with stringent oversight of foster homes and adequate and consistent investigations and casework must be maintained. Collaborative efforts between judges, attorneys, caseworkers and others in the child welfare system must be emphasized when contemplating permanency planning for children. It is in the aforethought of what positive things could happen for children in the child welfare system that will allow for collaboration between all parties and create a platform to increase permanency rates while working in best interest of the child.

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