Challenges of Transcultural Placements: Foster Parent Perspectives

Jason D. Brown, David St. Arnault, Natalie George, and Jennifer Sintzel

A random sample of licensed foster parents in a central Canadian province was asked, “What are the challenges of fostering children who have different values, beliefs, and traditions than you?” In response to this question, 49 unique responses were made and grouped together by foster parents. Seven themes emerged from the analysis: understanding, respecting, learning, compromising, disagreements, child’s feelings, and teaching. Several differences were found between the literature and study participants, suggesting areas worthy of future research.

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Foster homes are the most often utilized out-of-home (OOH) placements for children in care (Roy, Rutter, & Pickles, 2000). Over the past several years, foster homes in the United States and Canada have received an increasing number of children (Directors of Child Welfare Committee, 2005; Hudson & Levasseur, 2002; U.S. General Accounting Office, 2007). Despite the high number of children requiring foster placements, the available number of foster homes has not kept pace with demand. According to the Child Welfare League of Canada, while the rate of placements increased by 38% between 1998/1999 and 2001/2002, an increase of only 21% in available foster placements (Farris-Manning & Zandstra, 2003). In some cases, the absence of a suitable foster placement has led to children being placed in hotels and homeless shelters (Mirwaldt, Perron, & Thomas, 2004).

An overrepresentation of Aboriginal, African American, Hispanic, and other children from nondominant cultures in both the United States and the Canadian foster systems is well documented (Elliott & Urquiza, 2006; Freisthler, Bruce, & Needell, 2007; Hand, 2006; Harris & Hackett, 2008; Trocmé, Knoke, & Blackstock, 2004). Across Canada, it is estimated that 40% of children in care are Aboriginal, but make up less than 17% of the general population (Farris-Manning & Zandstra, 2003; Statistics Canada, 2008). In Illinois, African American children account for 75% of the foster care population and make up 20% of the general population (Schwartz, 2007).

Familiar customs and surroundings can reduce the difficulties experienced by children coming into care (Perez-Foster, 1998). Although the use of kinship care (Coakley & Orme, 2006; Green, 2003) and requirements to recruit foster parents who reflect the cultural diversity of the children in care (Barbell & Freundlich, 2001) have risen, transcultural placements are often the reality (Coakley

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& Orme, 2006; Halverson, Puig, & Byers, 2002). For example, the British Columbia Children’s Commissioner’s 1998 annual report found that only 2.5% of Aboriginal children in care received culture-matched placements despite a statutory requirement to give preference to Aboriginal homes (Blackstock & Bennett, 2003). There are also reports of similar trends with Hispanic children in the United States, where the increase in OOH care population continues to outpace the supply of Hispanic foster homes (Capello, 2006; Coakley & Orme, 2006). Awareness of these discrepancies has led to some enhanced research and practice interest in transcultural placements (Coakley & Orme, 2006; de Haymes & Simon, 2003).

Low rates of retention among foster parents in many jurisdictions contribute to the chronic shortage of foster placements. Up to 40% of foster homes discontinue fostering within the first year (Chamberlain, Moreland, & Reid, 1992), and an additional 20% plan to do so (Rhodes, Orme, Cox & Beuhler, 2003). A better understanding of the challenges that foster parents experience may be used to promote retention and satisfaction as well as the well-being of foster children in transcultural placements. The purpose of the present study is to examine the challenges faced by parents fostering children from a different cultural background than their own. A random sample of foster parents in a central Canadian province was asked, “What are the challenges of fostering children who have different values, beliefs, and traditions than you?”

The varied experiences that individuals bring with them are part of their unique cultural appearance, experience, and expression. Every individual embodies some features or characteristics

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associated with the groups he or she belongs to, as well as the social realities associated with that membership. *Ethnicity* refers to a deep-rooted sense of who one is as part of groups she or he is a member of, and includes how one sees self as alike or different from other members. Race may be a visible indicator of group membership. *Culture* includes ethnicity and race as well as one’s unique set of values, norms, institutions, and artifacts that together represent a way of appreciating and being in the world.

**Literature Review**

Largely in response to the imbalance between the high numbers of children in need of placements and the lack of available foster homes, kinship care has received great emphasis in both practice and literature (Berrick, Barth, & Needell, 1994; Gleeson, 1995). Although some studies have been criticized for methodological shortcomings (Park & Green, 2000), significant advantages to cultural matching, as a feature of kinship care, have been described (Duerr, Berrick, & Barth, 1994). Children in kinship care experience less disruption and change during the placement process (Perez-Foster, 1998) and have a greater sense of belonging (Beeman & Boisen, 1999). Kinship foster children experience fewer placements than those in non-kinship care (Courtney, 1995; Courtney & Needell, 1997) and also have a more well-developed cultural identity (Schwartz, 2007).

In Canada, transcultural placements are also frequent among adoptive and non-kinship foster families. Some possible differences between transcultural parenting experiences in adoptive versus non-kinship foster families include the child’s age at placement, expected duration of the relationship, and presence of different children representing various backgrounds in the same home. Although there is considerable literature on the transcultural parenting experiences of adoptive caregivers in the United States, very little data on foster parent or foster child experience exists. Practical benefits of recognizing the challenges associated with cultural differences in fostering include potential for effective training and support
services that promote retention of foster parents, as well as improved outcomes for foster children.

Close to half of non-kinship foster parents report caring for children from a different background than their own (Coakley & Orme, 2006). Significant challenges for foster and adoptive parents concern their knowledge, practice and comfort in meeting the unique needs of foster children who come from a different cultural background. For many, their knowledge depends on getting relevant and practical training at an appropriate time.

**Cultural Receptivity and Competence**

Children in transcultural adoptive placements have been identified as being at risk of various developmental and psychological difficulties without specific attention to their cultural needs (De-Berry, Scarr, & Weinberg, 1996; Thoburn, Norford, & Rashid, 2000; Vonk, 2001; Zuniga, 1991). Much research on the challenges for parents of transcultural placements focuses on the challenge of meeting the cultural needs of the children to promote the development of their cultural identity (Massatti, Vonk, & Gregoire, 2004; Vonk, 2001). Cultural receptivity and cultural competence of foster parents are associated with the healthy identity development in their foster children (Coakley & Orme, 2006; Massatti et al., 2004).

Parent receptivity to the roles of ethnicity and race in development are likely to promote achievement of a clear and well-developed cultural identity among foster children. Cultural receptivity is defined by Coakley and Orme (2006) as the willingness to seek training, support, and services to increase transcultural parenting abilities. Cultural competence is necessary to promote development of a positive identity and survival skills for life in a racist society. Cultural competence is a multidimensional construct consisting of racial awareness, multicultural planning, and survival skills (Vonk, 2001).

**Training**

Transracial foster and adoptive parents have identified numerous challenges and the need for training support (de Haymes & Simon,
2003). Their confidence and practice in dealing with the perceptions of others about their motives to foster, the response of their own extended family members to the child, and combating racism in their community could be effectively enhanced through participation in training (de Haymes & Simon, 2003). There is evidence that cultural awareness training can promote confidence and cultural competence among foster parents. In a national study of current and former foster parents, parents who anticipated on continuing to foster were more likely to have received in-service training on fostering a child of a diverse race or culture than were those who intended on quitting or who had already quit (Rhodes, Orme, Cox, & Buehler, 2001).

Method

Concept mapping (Trochim, 1989) is a method for quantitative analysis of qualitative data. Although initial applications have been in program evaluation (Cousins, Aubry, Fowler, & Smith, 2004; Poole & Davis, 2006; Rosas & Camphausen, 2007), the approach has also been utilized for theory development and program planning (Leeuw, 2003; Rosas, 2005; Yampolskaya, Nesman, Hernandez, & Koch, 2004), and in research, for construct operationalization (Borden, Perkins, Villarruel, Carleton-Hug, Stone, & Keith, 2006; Poole & Davis, 2006), scale development and validation (Butler, Hernandez, Benoit, Budman, & Jamison, 2008; Myers, MacPherson, Jones, & Aarons, 2007; Osborne, Elsworthy, & Whitfield, 2007; Rosas & Camphausen, 2007). Participants have included researchers, community members, and health professionals as participants (Robinson & Trochim, 2007), as well as adolescents (Chun & Springer, 2005; Ries, Voorhees, Gittelsohn, Roche, & Astone, 2008), and seniors (Shewchuk & O’Connor, 2002). Relevant to the present study, participants have included parents of children struggling in school (Bimler & Kirkland, 2001), youth involved in the justice system (Corcoran, 2005), young children with attachment concerns (Kirkland, Bimler, Drawneek, McKim, & Schölmerich, 2004),
as well as ethnic minority children (Perkins, Borden, Villarruel, Carlton-Hug, Stone, & Keith, 2007), and adopted children (Ryan & Nalavany, 2003).

Concept mapping was selected for the present study because of the advantages it has for this topic and the population of interest. There are few studies on caregiver experiences of transcultural fostering in the literature. An advantage of concept mapping is that it offers an opportunity to acquire some breadth of knowledge related to the range of issues associated with the research question that can then guide more focused future research efforts. Although foster parents have participated in many research studies, few of those methods involved them in the analysis of results. Another advantage of concept mapping is that the participants determine, collectively, how all responses fit together conceptually.

Five steps were followed. The first step included the identification of participants, focal question for the study and collection of responses to the question. In the second step was editing responses for clarity. Redundant responses were also removed from analysis. In the third step, participants were asked to group together all responses to the question into distinct concepts. The fourth step was data analysis of the groupings returned by participants and included multidimensional scaling as well as cluster analysis. The researchers decided on the most appropriate number of concepts for the final concept map. In the fifth step, the researchers assigned labels to the concepts in the final map.

Participants and Research Question

Participants were licensed foster parents in a central Canadian province. The complete registry of foster homes was used to make contact with participants. A randomized list of telephone numbers for 2,310 foster homes was provided to the researchers. Researchers contacted the homes in order and continued until they received no novel responses from five consecutive interviews.

A total of 61 foster parents from 57 families were interviewed; all participants were asked if there was another foster parent in the
home at the time of interview. If that individual was not immediately available, contact information was provided. None of those for whom contact information was left contacted the researchers. The majority (84%) of participants were female and about one third (34%) were the only foster parents in the home. About half (46%) resided in an urban area. They had fostered from less than a year to 38 years (average of 12 years), and at the time of interview had between zero and four foster children (average of two children). The total number of children fostered by participants ranged considerably, from 1 to 200 (average of 30 children).

Potential participants were contacted by telephone and provided with a verbal description of the study. Those who gave verbal consent to participate were asked, “What are the challenges of fostering children who have different values, beliefs, and traditions than you?” They were asked to respond to this question based on all previous and current fostering experience. They were also asked about their interest in grouping responses at a later date.

**Response Editing**

The participants made 101 responses to the question in total. Three reviewers—the first author, a teacher, and a human services professional—individually examined the list of 101 responses and identified any that were unclear or redundant. Only on those responses where there was agreement by two of the three raters about the need for editing and the nature of necessary editing were changes made for clarity and essential meaning. For example, the response “it is really hard keeping up with them as they grow up” was edited for essential meaning to “keeping up with them.” The same process was followed for identification and removal of redundant responses. An example of redundant responses was in the statements “meeting the child halfway” and “meeting her in the middle.” Initially lists were kept separate by gender, but because there appeared to be few differences, they were combined. After redundant responses were removed, 49 responses were left for the analysis.
Grouping Responses

The 45 foster parents who were receptive to grouping responses at the time of interview were then contacted. The 31 who remained interested were mailed a full set of responses, each printed on a separate slip of paper (for easier manipulation), and asked to group them together in whatever way they wished. When they were finished, they were asked to contact the researchers by telephone, and provide their groupings. Thirteen participants returned their groupings of the responses.

Analysis of Grouping Data

The analysis of grouping data was performed by the concept system (Trochim, 1987). Analysis included two procedures, multidimensional scaling and cluster analysis, before the researchers decided upon the most appropriate number of concepts for the final map.

Multidimensional scaling placed the responses on a map called a point map, where distances between responses reflected the frequency with which they were grouped together by participants. The bridging index, a value between 0 and 1, was calculated for each response and indicated how often the response bridged, or was grouped together, by participants with other responses close to it on the map. A bridging index with a value of .75 or greater (i.e., a high value) indicated that a particular response “bridged,” or was grouped together often, with responses in other areas of the map, while a bridging index of .25 or less (i.e., a low value) indicated that a particular response rarely “bridged” with responses in other areas of the map.

The multidimensional scaling values were analyzed using cluster analysis to describe the underlying conceptual structure (Anderberg, 1973; Everitt, 1980). The analysis began with each response being treated as its own concept, and the concepts were combined one at a time, until all responses were in one concept. The most appropriate number of concepts for the final map was determined by the researchers after considering maps with five,
six, seven, eight, and nine clusters. The seven-cluster map was selected based on conceptual fit within (responses within the clusters seemed to make sense together) and distinctions between (based on responses in each cluster with lowest bridging indexes) clusters. The seven-cluster map provided the greatest interpretability.

Cluster Labels

Participants were asked as part of the grouping task to provide descriptive labels for the concepts. These suggested labels were consulted by the researchers in the process of selecting labels for the final seven-cluster map. The labels “disagreements” and “child’s feelings” were provided directly by participants, and the others used in the final map were combinations of other labels provided by participants.

Results

The final concept map appears in Figure 1, and the individual responses with bridging indices are listed in Table 1.

Discussion

In this section, we compare the results of the present study to the available literature. Similarities and differences are noted.

Understanding

Responses in this concept focused on developing knowledge about the child’s cultural background. Parents indicated that they spent effort “discovering child’s priorities and identity.” They wanted each child to feel like she or he was “being accepted” in their home, so took an interest in “finding out where they are coming from” and “figuring out what to do for the child.” This meant “familiarizing yourself with their beliefs,” “accepting child’s culture and values,” and “accommodating child’s traditions” in some way. In addition, parents found that once they understood the child’s culture they also were “educating social workers on child when visiting.”
There is literature reflecting foster parents receptivity to children’s unique cultures (Coakley & Orme, 2006). The challenges described in this cluster concern the necessity to learn about the child and his or her cultural upbringing as well as inform others (e.g., social workers) about that child. The purpose of such learning is to promote harmony in the foster home, where a foster child can feel like she or he is “accepted.” While there is reference in the literature to the need to promote a healthy cultural identity in children in care, who are by definition considered at risk for difficulties (Massatti et al., 2004), much less attention has been paid to the need for promotion of wellness in relationships among members of the foster family.

Respecting

The responses in this concept focused on the process of discovering the culture of a foster child, and doing so by taking care to
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cluster and Statement</th>
<th>Bridging Index</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cluster #1—Understanding</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. accepting child’s culture and values</td>
<td>0.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. accommodating child’s traditions</td>
<td>0.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. being accepted</td>
<td>0.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. educating social workers on child when visiting</td>
<td>0.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. familiarizing yourself with their beliefs</td>
<td>0.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. discovering child’s priorities and identity</td>
<td>0.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. figuring out what to do for the child</td>
<td>0.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. finding out where they are coming from</td>
<td>0.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cluster #2—Respecting</strong></td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41. remembering to always be open to new ideas</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49. willingness to allow them to seek things for themselves</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. being patient</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42. respecting differences</td>
<td>0.05</td>
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<tr>
<td>34. letting them be who they are</td>
<td>0.07</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Cluster #3—Learning</strong></td>
<td>0.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43. setting your feelings aside and doing what is best for the child</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45. trying something new</td>
<td>0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32. keeping up with them</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35. making it compatible for everyone in the family</td>
<td>0.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48. trying to blend both my values and their values together</td>
<td>0.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29. helping them to understand they are still loved regardless of beliefs</td>
<td>0.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46. trying to meet the differences without compromising your own beliefs</td>
<td>0.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. getting children to learn the ways of the family</td>
<td>0.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cluster #4—Compromising</strong></td>
<td>0.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. getting child to respect your values and beliefs</td>
<td>0.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36. meeting the child halfway</td>
<td>0.32</td>
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<tr>
<td>20. getting child interested in cultural events</td>
<td>0.33</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cluster #5—Disagreements</td>
<td>0.30</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. birthfamily feeling hatred toward us</td>
<td>0.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. feeling like an evil person</td>
<td>0.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38. not knowing where to go to help them incorporate their own culture</td>
<td>0.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. hard to get children to change</td>
<td>0.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. frustrating to all parties involved</td>
<td>0.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37. more difficult to understand the beliefs of younger children</td>
<td>0.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. biological parents and social workers insist child is taught their culture</td>
<td>0.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39. not seeing eye to eye</td>
<td>0.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33. lack of respect for my beliefs</td>
<td>0.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. hard to understand child's reactions if you don't understand their beliefs</td>
<td>0.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. hard to accept new views</td>
<td>0.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27. hard when you don't believe the same way</td>
<td>0.37</td>
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<tr>
<td>25. hard to know what to teach the kids</td>
<td>0.40</td>
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<tr>
<th>Cluster #6—Child's Feelings</th>
<th>0.36</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8. child feels she does not belong here</td>
<td>0.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. child had no interest in his cultural traditions</td>
<td>0.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. differences in cultures and backgrounds stand out and bother foster kids</td>
<td>0.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. child lashes out</td>
<td>0.39</td>
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<tr>
<td>11. child loses her background</td>
<td>0.49</td>
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<tr>
<th>Cluster #7—Teaching</th>
<th>0.75</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>28. having to put my beliefs and traditions on hold</td>
<td>0.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44. sticking to your guns</td>
<td>0.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47. trying to teach them your traditions and beliefs</td>
<td>0.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30. incorporating religion where needed</td>
<td>0.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40. planting God into their hearts</td>
<td>1.00</td>
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avoid prejudgment. Parents describe their efforts “remembering to always be open to new ideas” and “being patient.” Although it was a challenge to hold back, “letting them be who they are” was fundamental to the need for “respecting differences.” Parents also needed “willingness to allow them to seek things for themselves.”

There is little attention in the literature to the process of cultural understanding by the foster parents led by the foster child. Although there are references for culture-based training and the need for this knowledge by transcultural parents (de Haymes & Simon, 2003), the nature of the expertise is assumed to reside within the training provider, and not the foster child her- or himself.

Learning

In this concept, the responses concerned learning ways to find balance between the cultural needs of the foster child and the cultural ways of the foster family before the foster child arrived. Parents indicated that “trying to meet the differences without compromising your own beliefs” was a goal, and it took work “trying to blend both my values and their values together.” At times, the balance was facilitated by parents simply “setting your feelings aside and doing what’s best for the child.” At other times, they said they worked on “getting children to learn the ways of the family.” Either way, these efforts meant “trying something new” while “making it compatible for everyone in the family.” In relation to the foster child, parents put a lot of effort into “keeping up with them,” and despite differences, “helping them to understand they are still loved regardless of beliefs.”

There is very little published research on the promotion of family balance in transcultural fostering. Attention has been placed on the development of a healthy cultural identity among foster children (Thoburn et al., 2000), and the necessary self-awareness as well as associated skill development among parents (Vonk, 2001); these qualities have been studied in relation to foster parent satisfaction and intent to continue (Rhodes et al., 2003), but not in relation to family well-being, as suggested by parents in the present study.
Compromising

In this concept, responses emphasized the challenges associated with compromise due to cultural differences in the home. Parents reported that they were “being expected to know the values, beliefs and traditions” of the foster child and expect to keep the “child interested in cultural events,” while in return, worked on “getting child to respect your values and beliefs.” Some focused on “meeting the child halfway” and some on “integrating child’s culture into family life.”

The literature on foster care, particularly kinship care, emphasizes the need for maintaining and strengthening an already forming cultural identity in foster children (Berrick et al., 1994; Gleeson, 1995), and suggests that experiences consistent with that identity are necessary for it to develop in a healthy way (Beeman & Boisen, 1999; Perez-Foster, 1998). Transcultural foster placements provide an opportunity to study and understand the experience of cultural identity development among children (foster, adoptive, and birth) and adults (i.e., foster parents), and the extent of positive effects and timing of those effects, if any, on those involved.

Disagreements

Responses in this concept described a range of disagreements between foster parents, birthfamilies and social workers, as well as the impact of those disagreements on foster parents. Participants indicated that “biological parents and social workers insist child is taught their culture,” while at times there seemed to be a “lack of respect for my beliefs.” When they were “not seeing eye to eye” with birthfamilies and social workers, it was “frustrating to all parties involved.” They found it “hard to accept new views” and “hard when you don’t believe the same way” as the birthparents. They experienced pressure from the “birthfamily feeling hatred toward us” that led some into “feeling like an evil person.”

Foster parents received little direction about cultural teachings from birthfamilies and the system, so found it “hard to know what
to teach the kids” and struggled with “not knowing where to go to help them incorporate their own culture.” When they sought direction from the foster children about their culture, they found it “hard to understand child’s reactions if you don’t understand their beliefs,” “more difficult to understand the beliefs of younger children,” and “hard to get children to change.”

It is apparent from the general fostering literature that unresolved conflict between those involved, including birthfamilies, social workers, and foster parents, does not promote a good environment for the foster family, including the foster child, to grow and develop, nor does it promote placement continuity or foster parent retention (Wilson, Sinclair, Taylor, Pithouse, & Sellick, 2004). Age-related differences among foster children, presumably through their ability to communicate their needs and wishes in relation to cultural experiences, has not been well-explored in recent research.

**Child’s Feelings**

In this concept, responses concerned experiences associated foster child’s integration into the cultural environment of the foster home. The “differences in cultures and backgrounds stand out and bother foster kids,” leading, in some cases, to incidents when the “child lashes out.” Foster parents indicated that the “child feels she does not belong here,” and by adapting to the culture of the foster family, “child loses her background.” However, it was also noted that, in some cases, the “child had no interest in his cultural traditions.”

Recognition by those delivering training on cultural sensitivity to foster parents, regarding the need for children to maintain their distinct sense of cultural self within the context of a foster family from a different culture, is apparent in the literature (de Haymes & Simon, 2003). Such training attends to a foster parent’s need to recognize the distinctiveness of the child, and to coach her or him on maintaining this sense of self in the local community outside of the foster home, and within the broader, racist society (de Haymes & Simon, 2003).
Teaching

Foster parents described their position as teachers of culture to foster children, and their struggles with what and how to teach. For some, this meant, "planting God into their hearts" and "incorporating religion where needed." Foster parents discussed their convictions for "sticking to your guns" and "trying to teach them your traditions and beliefs." While at other times, teaching meant "having to put my beliefs and traditions on hold."

There appears to be some indication of either/or thinking about which culture foster parents should teach foster children. Given the cultural mistreatment and current overrepresentation of children from nonmajority cultures in care of majority culture foster parents, there is justifiable sensitivity and efforts made to preserve the cultures of children who come into care in current research (Massatti et al., 2004). Yet, there has been little attention by researchers to the contributors to cultural identity preservation among children from nonmajority cultures in majority-culture foster homes. Another gap in the literature concerns the decision-making process among foster parents about what is taught about culture and how it is taught in transcultural foster homes. For example, is there an optimal way of understanding and practicing culture by attending to both similarities and differences that protects a foster child’s identity development while maintaining relationships between members of the foster family and foster child?

Conclusion

There are several similarities and differences between the results of the present study and the existing literature. Similarities add support to the findings of previous research in the area, while differences indicate areas where further research may be worthy of exploration.

Similarities

Consistent between the literature and the perspectives of foster parents who participated in the present study was an emphasis on
the need for receptivity on the part of caregivers to the unique cultural needs of foster children in their home. There was clear recognition that cultural differences existed, and that they as foster parents would benefit from not only self-understanding of (their own) culture, but understanding the culture of the foster child and birthfamily, to provide care that protects the development of a healthy identity in the foster child. Understanding was not sufficient, however. Skill development and practice were also considered necessary components of cultural awareness by foster parents.

Another consistency between the perspectives of foster parents in the present study and the literature was the presence of disagreement based on different values, beliefs, and traditions, between social workers, the birthfamily, and the foster family. The research evidence is clear that such situations are associated with negative outcomes for all parties: social workers lose foster homes, foster parents quit fostering, foster children experience tension in and lose a placement, and birthfamilies are left to develop new connections with another set of substitute care providers. Prevention, according to the literature and participants in the present study—through foster parent preparation, advance knowledge, and receptivity to continue learning and accommodating cultural differences—is crucial.

There was also recognition among participants in the study as well as within the literature on the harm associated with efforts made to change or replace the cultural values, beliefs, and traditions of a foster child with those of a different culture (Hollingsworth, 1997; Smith, McRoy, Freundlich, & Kroll, 2008). There are multiple reports, both historical and contemporary, about damages to a child’s sense of self as well as connections with birthfamily and community that are associated with chronic and serious health and social problems, which result from attempted assimilation (Register, 1990a; Register, 1990b; Trenka, Oparah, & Shin, 2006).

Differences

Among parents in the present study, there was emphasis on relationships between members of the foster family, including relationships
with the foster child. Much previous research on culture has focused on challenges according to different perspectives, with the unit of analysis as foster parent (as in this study), birthparent, or child welfare/foster care professional. We did not encounter research from a family perspective—one where the foster family itself was the unit of analysis—from either a deficit- or strengths-based perspective. Combining perspectives of those involved in a foster family and the ways they perceive their relationships with the others, (e.g., how they see themselves relating ineffectively or effectively) may be a worthy topic for future research on the practice of transcultural fostering.

Parents in the present study also indicated their interest in following the lead of the foster child as a teacher of her or his culture. However, according to the literature (Lee, 2003; Shiao & Tuan, 2008), more active involvement of caregivers in presenting opportunities has been seen as optimal. Very little attention has been paid in the literature to the perspectives of foster children about what they need in foster care, and there is virtually no literature on their cultural needs from their perspective. While foster parents in the present study struggled to learn from very young children about their culture, opportunities for older children to teach their foster parents are logical and practical. This is another area that may be worthy of attention in future research on transcultural fostering.

Much of the literature emphasizes the need for foster children to maintain their sense of cultural identity and connections in spite of a transcultural foster placement. Foster parents in the present study described some possible benefits to themselves from fostering children from different cultures than their own (e.g., learn about another culture). It may be worthwhile to ask foster parents, as well as others involved in transcultural fostering placements—such as foster children and birthfamilies—about the benefits, if any, of these placements.

Limitations

This study had several limitations. No data were collected on ethnicity, cultural composition of the foster home, or caregiver
socioeconomic status, so no comparisons of concepts based on these factors are possible. In addition, the participation rate for the sorting task from those who participated in an interview was modest (13 of 61). A final limitation concerns perspective. No data were collected from foster children. Only foster parents participated in the study.

References


