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Understanding E-Learning as Professional Development for Rural Child Welfare Professionals

Linda S. Kingery
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Walden University

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Linda Kingery

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Walden University

2018

Abstract

Understanding E-Learning as Professional Development for Rural Child Welfare

Professionals

by

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MSW, University of Illinois, Urbana, 2005

BSW, University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, 1987

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

General Psychology

Walden University

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Abstract

Ongoing professional development is an integral part of a child welfare agency's strategy toward the provision of services to children and families involved with a child welfare intervention. Electronic learning (E-Learning) is popular as a fiscally responsible and flexible way to deliver such trainings. There is a gap in the research addressing the problem of how child welfare professionals are motivated to engage in the E-learning process. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the perceptions of child welfare professionals regarding their motivation to use an agency provided E-learning program. Eight child welfare professionals employed by a Midwestern private child welfare agency participated in semi-structured interviews, which were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. A pattern matching logic model was used to extrapolate relevant themes. The themes from this study were that work environment, irrelevance of content, and emotional aspects of child welfare work were barriers to engaging in E-learning during a work day. The implications for positive social change are that using E-learning as a delivery system for training in child welfare needs to be combined with a concerted effort to develop programs that first consider the work environment of the child welfare professional and the relevance of content. Providing more effective training is expected to result in better trained workers, which leads to more effective child welfare interventions. More effective child welfare interventions are needed to resolve the current crisis within the field of child welfare, which protects one of society's most vulnerable populations.

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Dedication

This project is dedicated to my beloved daughter, Cori Kaye Kingery Rothrock, who left this world too soon on September 14, 2015. She never tired of telling anyone she met that her mom was “going to be a Dr.”. Thanks, Cori, for helping me complete the final phase of this project! Love your mom, “soon to be” Dr. Linda S Kingery

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Anytime you see a turtle up on top of a fence post, you know she had some help.

Alex Haley

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The purpose of this qualitative, single case study was to explore the electronic learning (E-learning) experiences of child welfare professionals in one Midwestern private child welfare agency serving primarily rural communities. E-learning is a new professional development strategy in child welfare, and particularly in the agency selected for this study (Collins, Kim, & Amodeo, 2010; Donavant, 2009; P. Griffith, personal communication, May 23, 2013). Due to the recent increase in distance learning within the field of child welfare, there is a lack of understanding of how child welfare professionals perceive and use this type of learning strategy. Administrative personnel from the study site agency reported that the E-learning program the agency implemented within the last 4 years was significantly underused (P. Griffith, personal communication, May 23, 2013). The social implications of this study include understanding child welfare professionals' motivation to engage in E-learning activities during their work day, which, when used in future development of online trainings, is expected to translate into improved work performance and positive outcomes for children and families.

In this chapter, I discuss the background of child welfare professional development challenges, as well as detail of past efforts to address the issues presented. The research questions developed came from the gap in research literature and from the concerns of a specific agency administrator. The conceptual framework of adult learning and self-regulation of motivation theories were also chosen because of the practice question focused on how rural child welfare professionals are motivated to engage in E-

learning activities. To conclude this chapter, assumptions, scope, and delimitations will be discussed.

Background

Although millions of federal dollars are spent annually on child welfare workforce trainings to improve outcomes for vulnerable children and families in the child welfare system, all 52 states (including District of Columbia and Puerto Rico) in the United States have failed the Child and Family Services Review (CFSR)—twice (Collins, et al., 2010). The CFSR is a monitoring system developed and implemented by the federal government to ensure that child welfare agencies in the United States are meeting child welfare performance standards regarding child safety, permanency, and well-being (Davidson, 2008). In both 2003 and 2009 federal reviews, all 52 state child welfare agencies did not meet the minimum practice standards set forth by the federal government (Children’s Bureau, 2017).

As a part of the Child Welfare and Adoption Assistance Act of 1980, Title IV-E funds have been allocated to fund training for current and future child welfare professionals (Davidson, 2008). The training was expected to address the issues of the repeated failure of child welfare agencies to meet acceptable performance standards and result in positive outcomes for children and families (Nguyen, 2012). Positive outcomes are defined by the federal government as a part of the CFSR process.

Expected child welfare outcomes are separated into seven systemic factors and seven outcomes in the areas of child safety, permanency, and well-being. The systemic factors are (a) statewide information system; (b) care review system; (c) quality assurance system; (d) staff and provider training; (e) service array and resource development; (f)

agency responsiveness to the community; and (g) foster and adoptive parent licensing, recruitment, and retention (Children's Bureau, 2017). There are two safety outcomes that require child welfare services to ensure that children are protected from child abuse/neglect and can live safely in their home of origin. The permanency outcomes focus on children who have entered the child welfare system either through an intact case or the process of protective custody. There are three well-being outcomes; the first is that families will have access to services that will enhance their capacity to provide for their children's needs. The second well-being outcomes involve children in foster care and their right to have their physical and mental health needs met (Children's Bureau, 2017).

In this study, I focused on the systemic factor of staff and provider training. Historically, child welfare training has involved workers traveling to a site outside of the workplace to spend time listening to a content expert with the expectation that the worker would apply the information gained upon a return to the workplace (Nguyen, 2012). Attendance was mandatory and easily monitored. As economics have changed and technology is more readily available, child welfare agencies are turning to a webinar training format or an asynchronous online learning environment, which although convenient, remains unproven regarding its effectiveness being superior to that of the more traditional face-to-face training format (Hardman & Robertson, 2012). Despite a lack of evidence of effectiveness, Donovan (2009) reported that the fiscal challenges of training events, along with the lack of resultant changes in improved work performance, means that distance learning should be included in professional development programs.

Scholars have identified issues around the disconnect between child welfare training and improved work performance and have focused on topics such as development and implementation of training (Collins et al., 2010) as well as transfer of training (Naquin & Holton, 2010). The gap in the research is the lack of understanding of child welfare professionals' motivation to engage in the learning activities presented to them within an emotionally charged and stressful work environment. In this case study, I explored the perceptions and understanding of eight child welfare professionals as they are related to motivation to engage in E-learning, thus addressing the gap in the research.

Problem Statement

Between 1995 and 2008, \$238.6 million dollars in federal Title IV-E funds were spent annually on training for child welfare professionals; yet, positive outcomes for children and families continue to fall below federal standards (Collins et al., 2010; Nguyen, 2012). Funds for training of child welfare professionals have declined from \$26.1 million in 2012 to \$18 million in 2016 (Children's Bureau, 2017).

Traditional training events are decreasing in popularity as developing technology increases opportunities for distance learning (Simpson, 2008). In an attempt to move toward fiscal responsibility, child welfare agencies are implementing E-learning programs to provide workers with a venue for self-directed learning that is more cost effective and less time consuming than the traditional format and as there would be less time needed to travel to a traditional training site. One Midwestern private child welfare agency administrator claimed that the challenge of using E-learning is that of motivating workers to use the agency's E-learning program. In this agency, the distance learning

program had been in place for 4 years and was reported to be significantly underused (P. Griffith, personal communication, May 5, 2013). Before the administrators in the field move toward spending money on new training programs, there is a need for further understanding of why the programs currently in place are or are not appropriately used.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative, single case study was to explore the perceptions and understanding of child welfare professionals in one Midwestern private child welfare agency and their motivation to use the agency provided E-learning program. The case study was conducted within a rurally located, private child welfare agency, which presented as a typical case (Stake, 1995). Increased understanding of the workers' response to the E-learning program was expected to further knowledge in the field of professional development, specifically an E-learning strategy, as well as assist one agency in the development of a program.

Research Questions

RQ: How do child welfare professionals in a private child welfare agency describe their motivation to engage in an agency-sponsored E-learning program?

Subquestion #1: How do these professionals perceive characteristics of the work environment as affecting their motivation to engage in E-learning?

Subquestion #2: How do these professionals perceive the ease of use of the agency's E-learning program as affecting their motivation to engage in E-learning?

Subquestion #3: How do these professionals perceive the relevance of the content in the agency's e-learning program as impacting their motivation to engage in E-learning?

Subquestion #4: How do these professionals perceive the impact of personal feelings of well-being on their motivation to engage in E-learning?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of the study was based on adult learning theory as well as motivational theories that are applicable to the research questions for this study. Adult learning theory (Knowles, 1980) as developed by Merriam (2008) and Mirci and Hensley (2010) has been used in the design and development of workforce training (Batalla-Busquets & Pacheco-Bernal, 2013; Collins et al., 2010; Hardman & Robertson, 2012; Mouzakitis & Tuncay, 2011). Adult learning theory is used to explore how adults in a work situation might respond to differing strategies of professional development.

Motivational theories, specifically, the self-regulation model (SRM) of motivation, is applicable to E-learning. According to the SRM, two kinds of motivation are essential to the learning process. The first type is goal-defined based on the value of the learning experience, what is the expected return on investment of effort; the second type of motivation is experience defined and related to the level of interest in the content on the part of the learner (Sansone & Thomas, 2005). The SRM was applied when addressing the research questions regarding the process of engagement as it relates to child welfare professionals and online professional development strategies. Both adult learning theory and motivational theory are key in the development of understanding how

child welfare professionals interact with the E-learning program that is discussed in this chapter and will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2.

Nature of the Study

This study was based on an interpretive perspective. Rather than search for some objective truth, the goal was to include participants in the research process to better understand the child welfare professionals' constructed reality regarding a E-learning program. The process of qualitative research is intended to allow the researcher and other scholars the opportunity for a glimpse into the lived experience of the research participant. The result is a thick, rich description that is not found in a quantitative approach to research (Creswell, 1997; Guba, 1981).

The study involved a qualitative methodology using semistructured, face-to-face interviews to develop a case study that captures the experience of child welfare professionals in a rural, private child welfare agency as it relates to attitude, motivation, and ability to use an E-learning program. A case study is appropriate for increasing a researcher's understanding of the phenomenon of motivation to learn at work, specifically within the situation presented within the field of child welfare and in a distance learning format.

Throughout the case study, child welfare professionals, employed at the selected private child welfare agency, participated in a face-to-face, semistructured interview. The interview was audio recorded and later transcribed verbatim for theming and coding. After the data were coded and themed, a cross case analysis of themes and comparative

case analysis was performed. Diverse sampling was used to develop rival explanations that might explain worker motivation to engage in distance learning.

Operational Definitions

Child welfare professional: A person employed by a child welfare agency and licensed by the state to provide child welfare services to those families experiencing a child welfare intervention (Children's Bureau, 2017).

Child and Family Services Review (CFSR): A process in which the federal government holds child welfare service agencies responsible for child welfare outcomes of safety, permanency, and well-being of children (Nguyen, 2012).

Child welfare outcomes: Standards set forth by the federal government in regard to child safety, permanency, and well-being (Children's Bureau, 2017).

Electronic learning (E-learning): A distance training methodology based on the use of information and communication technologies that allows both synchronous and asynchronous communication among learners as well as access to a variety of resources (Batalla-Busquets & Pacheco-Bernal, 2013).

High reliability organization (HRO): High reliability work settings are organizational entities made up of multidisciplinary teams that must provide reliable performance while facing an uncertain and changing input environment. These organizations must operate error-free or risk negative consequences (Gardner & Yun, 2010)

Motivation to improve work through learning: How the research participants are motivated to train and level of motivation to transfer learning (Naquin & Holton, 2010).

Private child welfare agency: A nonprofit child welfare agency, contracted by the state-operated child welfare agency, to provide child welfare services to children and families involved in a child welfare intervention (Collins et al., 2010).

Self-regulation of motivation model (SRM): A model of motivation that suggests there are two kinds of motivation to learn; it is either goal-defined or experience-defined (Sansone, Fraughton, Zachary, Butner, & Heiner, 2011).

Assumptions

A primary assumption of this research and any research that involves self-report as the method of data collection was that the child welfare professionals were honest in their responses to questions posed during the interview process. It was also assumed that the qualitative methodology chosen for the project was the best way to explore a deeper understanding of the child welfare professionals' relationship to the E-learning process. I also assumed that the chosen research site was one that presented as a bounded case, and one that shared some common characteristics with other private child welfare agencies (Stake, 1995). Finally, the catalyst for this study was based on the assumption that well-trained workers equal positive child welfare outcomes for children and families.

Scope and Delimitations

The philosophical underpinnings of this study were constructivist in nature in that the rationale for a qualitative methodology is based on the assumption that a person's world view is constructed (Guba, 1981). The emphasis of this project was the research participants' perceptions and understanding of the learning process. My primary focus

was on understanding the participants' perception and lived experience of using the E-learning program to increase my understanding of the reported underuse of the program.

The identified population of child welfare professionals was chosen due to the nuances of the child welfare environment and developments in technology that have led to an increase in the use of a distance learning format as a professional development strategy (Collins et al., 2010). Based on the conceptual frameworks of adult learning theory and motivational theory, adults are self-directed in their learning, which supports the use of a qualitative methodology. The diversity of sampling and the agency site chosen as a typical case for study increased the likelihood of transferability to other child welfare agencies.

Significance

The field of child welfare deals with a vulnerable population: children and families in need of a social service intervention to correct conditions that have led to child abuse and/or neglect (Collins et al., 2010). Child welfare professionals are charged with the responsibility of assessing these service needs along with making determinations regarding the safety and well-being of children, which requires continuing professional development as it relates to providing evidence-supported interventions (Nguyen, 2012). As workforce development is transitioning from a traditional face-to-face format to a distance learning strategy, there is a need for an increased understanding of the process of engaging child welfare professionals in E-learning programs.

A case study was deemed an appropriate design in providing information from the perspective of the child welfare professionals who are expected to engage in the learning

experience in the midst of an emotionally charged and stressful work environment. This increased understanding of the experience of the child welfare professional as E-learner is expected to impact the field of workforce development, curriculum development, and agency choice in programming, which will impact the professional development of child welfare workers, who ultimately help to create positive social change with the interventions and service provision to children and families.

Summary and Transition

Child welfare professionals are charged with the responsibility of ensuring safety, permanency, and well-being for one of society's most vulnerable populations: children suspected of being abused and/or neglected by a caregiver. The child welfare intervention process includes assessment of safety and service needs to determine if a child will remain in the home of his/her biological family or be taken into protective custody by the state and placed in substitute care with a relative/kinship caregiver or a traditional foster home (Collins, Amodio, & Clay, 2008). The complexity and importance of completing these tasks appropriately cannot be overstated.

Knowledgeable and skilled child welfare professionals are the greatest asset of any child welfare agency. Federal and state governments make expenditures upwards of \$8 million annually on training these workers (Nguyen, 2012). For economic reasons and an increase in availability of technology, many child welfare agencies are investing in an E-learning format to increase opportunities for training, especially those trainings that are mandated by the federal government and must be completed annually. However, there is

a lack of evidence as to the effectiveness of these programs and the need for understanding of the worker's motivation to use such a program.

In Chapter 2, I present a review of the literature on adult learning theory, SRM, E-learning, and the complexities of working in the field of child welfare.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The child welfare system in the United States is charged by the government with the responsibility of ensuring the safety, permanency and well-being of one of society's most vulnerable populations: children in need of an intervention due to issues of suspected and/or substantiated child abuse/neglect (Collins et al., 2008; Davidson, 2008). Each state is required to have a centralized child welfare agency that carries out this federal government mandate. In turn, the federal government provides funding to these state agencies through contractual arrangements with private child welfare agencies (Davidson, 2008) to ensure quality service provision. To qualify for funding, any agency providing child welfare services is expected to meet federal performance standards and is monitored by the CFSR to ensure these standards are met.

To maintain performance standards, workforce development is a part of the operations of any child welfare organization. Title IV-E funds, as part of the Child Welfare and Adoption Assistance Act of 1980, have funded training for child welfare agencies for the past 4 decades in an effort to raise performance standards within the field of child welfare (Collins-Camargo & Garstka, 2014). In spite of government expenditures that are provided annually to child welfare agencies in the United States for such training, all 52 states (including Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia) have failed to meet the expected federal standards twice --both in 2003 and 2009 (Collins et al., 2010). The most recent CFSR in 2013 in one Midwestern state showed little improvement in performance

and resulted in an assessment of continued subpar performance in the area of timely reunification of families who have been separated by a court intervention (Children's Bureau, 2017).

With continued failure to meet federal performance standards, child welfare organizations are facing the challenge of developing and maintaining a skilled and knowledgeable workforce in a way that is both fiscally responsible and effective. The goal of any training or learning activity is to engage the worker/learner in the lifelong learning process (Mouzakitis & Tuncay, 2011) to keep pace with new information that facilitates the provision of evidence-supported interventions to families in need of child welfare services (Collins et al., 2008; Nguyen, 2012). This is difficult in the field of child welfare due to daily work tasks that are stressful in that they are invasive and often unwanted by the family (Collins et al., 2010; Davidson, 2008). Adding to this stress is the challenge of identifying and addressing the underlying issues of child maltreatment, such as poverty, mental illness, domestic violence, and/or substance abuse (Collins et al., 2010). Child welfare organizations, like many other businesses, are turning to E-learning as a professional development strategy that is more cost effective for the agency and provides greater flexibility and self-regulation for the child welfare professionals (Batalla-Busquets & Pacheco-Bernal, 2013).

This transition to an E-learning format is beneficial to the organization or employer; what is less understood is how the learner, in this case the child welfare professional, engages in and relates to the learning activity. The purpose of this study was to describe the child welfare professionals' understanding of their motivation to engage in

the E-learning process as a professional development strategy, which will inform the development of future training strategies.

In this chapter, I will discuss how adult learning theory and SRM theory are applicable to building a foundation for understanding why child welfare professionals engage or fail to engage in the E-learning process. I will also review the studies that address motivation to engage and sustain motivation during E-learning activities within the work environment. Finally, I will describe the work environment of child welfare and its relation to the E-learning process, which is the rationale for a qualitative single case study that will be helpful in understanding the lived experiences of rural child welfare professionals, specifically in the area of professional development via an E-learning strategy.

Search Strategy

Scholarly articles reviewed were obtained using a search of Academic Search Premier, the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), Thoreau: Walden University Multiple Database Search, Google Scholar, and ProQuest Dissertation database. Qualifiers used in this search were that the articles were peer-reviewed and published between 2008 and the present date to represent the most recent 5 years of scholarly endeavors along with theoretical foundation articles that were published as far back as 1980. Keywords used in the search were *online workforce development, online learning theory, online training, child welfare training, online training in child welfare, child welfare workforce development, workforce development, engagement of workers, E-*

learning and workforce development, motivation to engage in learning, motivation to engage in online learning, motivation and adult learning, and adult learning theory.

I began my search in Thoreau using the search terms, online workforce development, online learning theory, child welfare training, and child welfare workforce development. I then used ERIC to search for keywords, E-learning, online learning, adult learning theory, and online learning theory. I also used ProQuest dissertation database using the terms: E-learning and workforce development, online training in child welfare, and child welfare workforce development

Addressing the Lack of Research

E-learning is a new strategy for workforce development in the field of child welfare (Collins et al., 2010), which accounts for the lack of research around the topic. However, distance learning has been used in academia as far back as the early 20th century when correspondence courses were popular (Artino, 2008). E-learning has become popular as an adult education strategy due to the convenience of the methodology; thus, there is research about the effectiveness of the methodology in academia. I will review the literature relating to adult learning principles and motivational theory as it relates to academia and organizational workforce development to provide the context for the study that will focus on the use of this strategy in a HRO like child welfare. An HRO is defined by Gardner and Yun (2010) as an organization that maintains a work environment that is nonroutine, high-risk, and uncertain and that requires specialized training that differs from a format used in traditional work environments.

Conceptual Framework

The phenomenon under study was the use of E-learning as a professional development strategy in the field of child welfare and how adult learners are motivated to engage in such activities during a typical work day that is stressful due to the emotional nature of the work (Collins et al.,2010; Gardner & Yun, 2010). Knowles (1980) and Westover (2009) proposed that any professional development strategy must consider that adults learn differently than children. Adults have a psychological need to be self-directed, bring an array of experiences that should be tapped during the learning process, are influenced by the need to solve real life problems, and place application of learning at the core of the learning experience. Westover added that adult learners have an emotional response to the learning process and will not be intimidated into learning but respond more favorably to material and processes that reflect an understanding of their individual backgrounds. These theoretical tenants have been supported by Mirci and Hensley's (2010) work on the constructive nature of adult learning. However, Merriam (2008) argued that adult learning is more complex than was originally reported by Knowles (1980); therefore, it cannot be adequately explained with one theory. Merriam suggested that two facets of adult learning theory that need further examination are the contextual aspects of learning and the emotional response to the learning activity.

One of the components of adult learning theory, as it relates to professional development in child welfare, is that of the importance of self-regulation, especially during an E-learning experience. Motivation drives the process of self-regulation and is based on whether or not the learner is engaged with the learning activity based on a goal

that carries with it the expectancy of learning or a matter of being interested in the content offered (Sansone et al., 2011). Sansone et al. (2011) tested this theory in a quantitative study that applied to online learning. However, the quantitative nature of Sansone et al.'s (2011) study and the fact that it involved 108 undergraduate students made it significantly different than the study I conducted in this dissertation. Although, Sansone et al.'s (2011) study adds to the knowledge of how students interact with online learning, it did little to increase the understanding of the contextual variables within a work environment. Sansone et al. (2011) did not address the variables of environment or emotionality of the job as it relates to engagement in the learning process.

In response to the lack of empirical studies of online education in the professional development arena, Donavant (2009) conducted a quasi-experimental study of the Florida Regional Community Policing Institute. Donavant compared online education as a training methodology with traditional delivery methods, specifically face-to-face training. Similar to participants in the Batalla-Busquets and Pacheco-Bernal (2013) study, Donavant found that the police officers preferred traditional delivery methods but appreciated the convenience of E-learning for professional development. Donavant found no significant difference between the effectiveness of the different delivery methods. This result is not unexpected; however, there is insufficient evidence to support the effectiveness of E-learning in the area of professional development (Donavant, 2009).

Adult Learning Theory in Online Training at Work

Collins, Kim, and Amodeo (2009) posited that the complexity of child welfare work and the emphasis on worker ability in the provision of appropriate service

intervention impacts the strategies for continual professional development. Adult learning theory has been used to frame research about adult education within the formal educational setting (Artino, 2007; Cercone, 2008; Donavant, 2009), within professional development (Batalla-Busquets & Pacheco-Bernal, 2013; Hardman & Robertson, 2012; Thorpe & Gordon, 2012), and online training in educational institutions as well as in the workplace (Batalla-Busquets & Pacheco-Bernal, 2013; Donavant, 2009; Hardman & Robertson, 2012; Thorpe & Gordon, 2012). Hardman and Robertson (2012) maintained that the catalyst for their study was the limited research about online training as workforce development.

Hardman and Robertson (2012) used a case study design, specifically an ethnographic case study, to answer research questions around the process of an online training course for entry-level workers in a large retail company in Canada and the workers' perceptions of the training. The primary goal of the study was to develop a greater understanding of how a generalized training program addresses the issue of engaging learners in the workplace (Hardman & Robertson, 2012). Self-directed learning within the workplace is complicated because it competes with the worker's requirement to also fulfill necessary work tasks/responsibilities (Bierema, 2008). In the case of entry-level worker training, the demands and pressures of work are less likely to interfere with the learning process than in an HRO like child welfare (Gardner & Yun, 2010).

The foundational premises of adult learning theory are that adults are self-regulated/self-directed, come with prior experiences and are engaged in learning when they are involved in the decisions about what and how they will learn (Knowles, 1980;

Merriam, 2008; Westover, 2009). Hardman and Robertson (2012) incorporated these factors in their research questions around understanding the process of the workers; interaction with online training at work and their perceptions of the program that was delivered online at work addresses similar areas to research study I completed.

The learning process, especially within the workplace, is impacted by the learner's past experiences, the applicability of content, and the learning environment (Merriam, 2008). This is particularly relevant in a child welfare agency where work is emotionally charged, stressful, and nonroutine. Using adult learning theory as a framework, the qualitative study I conducted provided a rich description of the lived experience of rural child welfare professionals as it related to the distance learning process within a complex HRO like child welfare.

Adult learners are autonomous, come with a wealth of experiences, and are interested in the relevance and applicability of the content in addition to how the learning will occur (Knowles, 1980; Merriam, 2008; Westover, 2009). Historically, understanding adult learning has been a result of studies within the field of academia, even when it concerned professional development (Blaschke, 2012; Westover, 2009). The research questions in this study were exploratory and intended to build upon the existing understanding of adult learning by examining the workers' perception of the E-learning program and their experience with engaging in the E-learning process within the stressful and emotionally charged work of child welfare.

E-Learning as a Workforce Development Vehicle

Distance learning, online learning, and E-learning are often used interchangeably (Stewart & Waight, 2008). For the purposes of this study, I have done the same. E-learning, as a training vehicle, has become more popular as it appeals to the organizational goal of ensuring that the professional workforce has access to lifelong learning for professional development while keeping within a restrictive budget (Mouzakitis & Tuncay, 2011). The majority of research related to E-learning has had a primary focus on higher education, while few scholars have addressed how this methodology might work in professional development environments (Donavant, 2009; Tabak & Nguyen, 2013).

Engagement in Child Welfare Training

E-learning as a workforce development strategy requires that the learner be motivated to engage with the E-learning program, interested enough to sustain the engagement, and self-directed in application of learning. Training is insufficient in the quest to develop the child welfare workforce capacity to provide suitable interventions to children and families undergoing the crisis of a child welfare intervention (Davidson, 2008; Luongo, 2007). Training is a useless endeavor unless the ultimate goal is achieved, specifically that learning has occurred (Mouzakitis & Tuncay, 2011). Before learning can occur, the learner must engage in the learning process, and the challenges of engagement increase in an HRO such as a child welfare agency (Gardner & Yun, 2010). Millions of dollars are spent annually to effectively train/educate the child welfare workforce (Nguyen, 2012) with the expectation that workers will learn and that this will lead to

improved performance (Luongo, 2007). However, there is insufficient proof that this is happening within the field of child welfare as evidenced by the CFSR data, which confirms ongoing substandard performance according to federal standards (Children's Bureau, 2017).

The field of child welfare presents with complexities due to the nature of the work, and these nuances impact the engagement and learning process (Gardner & Yun, 2010), especially in an E-learning format (Artino, 2007; Donovan, 2009; Hardman & Robertson, 2012). Scholarly discussion has occurred in regard to training for child welfare professionals (Collins et al., 2010; Collins et al., 2008; Luongo, 2007; Nguyen, 2012) and transfer of training (Antle, Barbee, Sullivan, & Christensen, 2009; Burke & Hutchins, 2008). However, engagement in online learning as a part of a workforce/professional development strategy or underuse of E-learning programs in child welfare has received less attention (Donovan, 2009; Hardman & Robertson, 2012).

In this technologically advanced age where training is delivered in an online environment, it becomes imperative that organizations understand how to engage the workforce as learners (Mirci & Hensley, 2010; Shuck & Wollard, 2008), and more specifically as online learners (Batalla-Busquets & Pacheco-Bernal, 2013; Donovan, 2009; Mouzakitis & Tuncay, 2011). Development of online learning programs in the field of child welfare is in its infancy; thus, there is a dearth of research on the subject. Those who provide social work education have been reluctant to incorporate distance learning into child welfare workforce development programs as it does not allow for the type of interpersonal interaction afforded in a more traditional face-to-face format (Collins et al.,

2010). In spite of hesitation to use this training vehicle early on, interest in E-learning in child welfare settings is on the rise due to its convenience and appeal to organizations attempting to maintain fiscal responsibility (Collins et al., 2010).

The Appeal of E-Learning

The E-learning format is appealing to adult learners due to the flexibility that makes it possible for the learner to continue with work, and life in general, while pursuing further education (Cercone, 2008; Donovan, 2009; Mouzakitis & Tuncay, 2011). This appeal is reported to hold true whether the learning is occurring in an academic or workplace environment (Batalla-Busquets & Pacheco-Bernal, 2013; Thorpe & Gordon, 2012). Organizations that require employees engage in continuing professional development are finding E-learning a fiscally responsible alternative to traditional face-to-face trainings that require more travel expenditures (Batalla-Busquets & Pacheco-Bernal, 2013; Hardman & Robertson, 2012; Mouzakitis & Tuncay, 2011). In spite of the advantage for organizations, there is less research on the workers' perceptions and attitudes toward E-learning that considers that these workers are required to complete ongoing training as part of their employment (Batalla-Busquets & Pacheco-Bernal, 2013).

In the Batalla-Busquets and Pacheco-Bernal (2013) study, 2,000 employees of a European bank completed an online survey regarding their perceptions of and motivations for using online training as well as their rationale for choosing E-learning or face-to-face instruction. The research participants were required by their employer to complete several virtual training courses as their employer had been using an E-learning

methodology for professional development. Based on adult learning theory, the participants preferred the flexibility and convenience of E-learning while reporting a higher level of motivation to learn when attending a face-to-face training. Although participants found value in the self-directed process of E-learning supporting the need for autonomy (Knowles, 1980; Merriam, 2008), they reported being more motivated by the social aspects of the traditional training venue.

Motivation to Persist in E-Learning

To explore the issue of motivation to persist in E-learning at work, Hardman and Robertson (2012) also believed the perspective of the learner was important. In their qualitative study of workers in a Canadian retail corporation, Hardman and Robertson used semistructured interviews to answer research questions that would reveal what process the workers used during the E-learning process and their perception of online training within the workplace. This study was a search for a deeper understanding of the lived experience of the learners. One of the primary differences between this study and the one discussed here is the context in which the learning occurred. The work environment in a retail corporation is less stressful and emotionally charged than that found in a child welfare agency where life and death decisions are made daily (Collins et al., 2010; Hardman & Robertson, 2012), and these differences impact the learning process (Gardner & Yun, 2010).

Environmental Factors

Workers employed by an HRO are exposed daily to an unpredictable work environment, where decisions made impact the lives of others, are expected to perform

their job responsibilities without error and to maintain peak performance at all times (Gardner & Yun, 2010). In their qualitative study of surgical residents at a trauma unit within a Mid-Atlantic hospital, the authors sought to explore the phenomenon of training within HRO's. The data collection process occurred over the course of 11 months and involved in-depth interviews with surgical residents in addition to direct observation of over 50 patient admissions to the unit. The training provided took place over time in a three-phase process called the Three-Phase Observational Learning Model (Gardner & Yun, 2010).

In this model, the trainees progressed from observing those with more experience and expertise to a phase that included guided participation and ultimately into self-management. During the first phase of the model, called the attention phase, the trainees shadowed the attending physicians and were expected to learn through observation by paying attention to how the veterans in the field were completing the routine responsibilities of the job. Following a time of learning through observation, the trainees entered a time of guided participation. After a considerable time of observation of those more experienced at the job and guidance from these well-trained professionals, the trainee began the transition into self-management. Throughout this process, the contextual factors like environment and interpersonal interactions impacted the learning process (Gardner & Yun, 2010).

The contextual aspects of the Gardner and Yun (2010) study were different than those experienced in this study. The learning process in their study occurred over a period of 11 months and in a traditional face-to-face format. This methodology allowed for

learners to receive external support that may lead to higher levels of perseverance and ultimate success (Simpson, 2008), which is particularly important in HRO's (Donavant, 2009; Gardner & Yun, 2010). The child welfare system, like the trauma unit in the previous study, presents a complex and stressful work environment (Collins et al., 2008; Collins et al., 2010;) where critical decisions are made daily (Collins et al., 2010) and work tasks are non-routine (Gardner & Yun, 2010). Based on the Gardner and Yun (2010) study, the nature of the similarities of the work of child welfare could serve as an indication that a traditional training format would be of greater benefit than E-learning, which is dependent on self-regulation throughout training (Sansone, et al., 2009).

Although here is an argument for face-to-face training being the optimum in an HRO, child welfare agencies are likely to turn to E-learning as a strategy for workforce development due to the financial savings and flexibility without a clear understanding of the child welfare professional's motivation to engage in the E-learning process (Collins et al., 2010; P. Griffith, personal communication, May 23, 2013). According to adult learning theory principles, self-regulation is one feature of the learning process that is particularly applicable to the engagement of adults in learning (Knowles, 1980; Merriam, 2008; Westover, 2009). The engagement with learning is directly related to learner motivation and the opportunity to choose what, when, and how they will utilize any type of ongoing professional development strategy (Sansone & Thomas, 2005; Westover, 2009).

Workforce Development in the Digital Age

As organizations use work-related online training to assist entry-level workers in learning daily tasks associated with their jobs, understanding the nuances of engaging workers in distance learning becomes paramount. In Hardman and Robinson's (2012) qualitative study conducted at a retail franchise store in Canada, 2 research questions were asked of entry-level workers: (a) "What is the process followed by workers in an online workplace training course?" and (b) "What are workers' perceptions of online training in a workplace training course?". The accounts provided by research participants were in line with previous research from Mezirow (1997) in relation to the cycle of orientation, which includes a period of disorientation as the learner first engages with the learning environment. During this phase, these participants benefited from a support intervention that had a positive impact on the learner's continuation in the program much like the support provided in the trauma unit of the Gardner and Yun (2010) study previously cited.

Complexities of Child Welfare

In developing an understanding of how to engage distance learners in child welfare workforce development, it is important to understand the contextual factors of the work environment. Gardner and Yun (2010) refer to organizations like child welfare, who engage in activities that are non-routine and involve making life and death decisions daily as HRO's. Professionals working in HRO's are confronted daily with the task of intervening in the lives of resistant clients at a time of emotional upheaval (Collins et al., 2008).

Learning occurs within an environment. The importance of the impact of the learning environment cannot be overstated. It is considerably different to sit in a classroom with others who are present for the purpose of learning than to be at work with frequent interruptions in the form of phone calls, unexpected tasks that demand immediate attention, and the complex emotions that come with working in a field that requires intervening in the life of another.

Summary

E-learning is a fact of life for the 21st century learner, whether the learning is taking place in academia or a workplace (Artino, 2007; Hardman & Robertson, 2012; Sansone et al, 2011; Simpson, 2008). Organizations interested in E-learning as a professional development strategy are motivated by the convenience and fiscal relief offered in this methodology (Hardman & Robertson, 2012; Thorpe & Gordon, 2012). Although workers/learners have reported being appreciative of the flexibility of E-learning, they reported feeling more motivated to participate in a face-to-face training format (Batalla-Busquets & Pacheco-Bernal, 2013; Hardman & Robertson, 2012). Research cited in this chapter supports the idea that E-learning is a viable option for professional development within routine work environments.

The gap in the research literature relates to how this same methodology is perceived by learners in an HRO like child welfare (Gardner & Yun, 2010; Collins et al., 2010). I used a qualitative single case study design, to explore the lived experience of child welfare professionals in a rural Midwestern private child welfare agency as it relates to their motivation to engage with the E-learning program currently offered by

their employer. In Chapter 3, I will explain the rationale for use of a case study research design and the plan for data collection and analysis.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The field of child welfare requires ongoing professional development to facilitate increased knowledge and skills of child welfare professionals to provide quality services to children and families in need of a service intervention because of child abuse/neglect (Collins et al., 2008). Traditionally, training has been provided primarily in a face-to-face format (Donovant, 2009). However, in light of recent technological advances and the financial savings of the E-learning format, child welfare agencies like the private child welfare agency selected for this study have purchased E-learning programs as an integral part of workforce development in the hopes of maintaining a well-trained workforce. According to the report of one agency administrator, the E-learning program that has been implemented is being underused. The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to tell the story of one private child welfare agency to explore the issue of motivation to engage in E-learning activities during a stressful and emotional work day from the perspective of the child welfare professional/learner.

This chapter contains information about the rationale for the chosen research method and design for this study. Also addressed are details of the methodology, which include an explanation of the role of the researcher, the setting and the participants, sampling techniques, data collections plan, and the data analysis plan. In the closing discussion, I will examine ethical considerations and strategies used to maintain trustworthiness throughout the study.

Research Design

Research Questions

RQ: How do child welfare professionals in a private child welfare agency explain their motivation to engage in an agency-sponsored E-learning program?

Subquestion #1: How do these professionals perceive characteristics of the work environment as affecting their motivation to engage in E-learning?

Subquestion #2: How do these professionals perceive the ease of use of the agency's E-learning program as affecting their motivation to engage in E-learning?

Subquestion #3: How do these professionals perceive the relevance of the content in the agency's E-learning program as impacting their motivation to engage in E-learning?

Subquestion #4: How do these professionals perceive the impact of their personal feelings of well-being on their motivation to engage in E-learning?

The phenomenon under study in this project was that of E-learning as a professional development strategy in the field of child welfare; I explored the motivation of the child welfare professional to engage in this particular strategy. The choice of a qualitative research design was based on the research questions that arose from the literature review and the concerns of one private child welfare agency administrator.

The questions were related to the how and why of the phenomenon of E-learning among child welfare professionals, which is more appropriate for a qualitative than a quantitative approach (Yin, 2009) A qualitative paradigm was also selected because the issue of motivation to engage in E-learning as part of a child welfare workforce

development strategy has not received a significant amount of attention in academic or practice research. For this reason, the phenomenon needs explanation (Yin, 2009).

Several qualitative research methods were considered in the design of this project. Ethnographic research is used to describe a group or culture; I considered ethnography because part of the rationale for this study was to describe the culture of child welfare professionals as it relates to E-learning activities. However, this method was ruled out due to the extensive time requirements for gathering data over a prolonged period of time to allow me the opportunity to engage as a participant observer in the group under study (Sangasubana, 2011). A dissertation study does not lend itself to this type of longitudinal design.

Grounded theory was also considered due to its use previously in studies related to adult education. Grounded theory design allows the researcher and participants to collaborate in the development of a theory that will lead to learning environments that would prove to be more appropriate for adult learners. This seemed to be a good fit for the study. However, it was not used because this project involved the unique learning strategy of E-learning within a stressful work environment, that of child welfare (Babchuk, 2011). The goal of this study was to describe the child welfare professionals' experience rather than develop a theory related to the phenomenon.

Finally, a phenomenological study was ruled out because the goal of the research was to tell the story of a small group of child welfare professionals' response to an E-learning program rather than to describe the lived experiences of a larger group of participants (Moustakas, 1994). After considering the previously mentioned research

methods, the decision was made to use a single case study that will provide a thick, rich description of both the experience of the participant and the context in which it occurs.

A case study is defined by Yin (2009) as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clearly evident” (p. 629). A single case study (embedded) was used with a E-learning program being the case, and the subunits of analysis being the individuals using the program. This case presents as typical because it is one of the many programs within the field of child welfare. It was anticipated that this typical case will lead to increased understanding of how child welfare professionals in other agencies are motivated to respond to E-learning activities.

Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher in a case study is that of the observer and the person responsible for both data collection and analysis, thus presenting a significant risk of personal bias. A key component of this process for me, as the lead investigator, was to maintain a field journal and examine any personal biases. These identified biases were addressed as such throughout the research process. A challenge for me has been my involvement with distance learning over the past 7 years while completing online coursework to prepare for this dissertation process. I am aware of the level of self-motivation it requires to learn in an online environment, so I made an effort to not project these feelings of isolation and frustration on to the research participants.

I have over 20 years of experience as a child welfare professional, which influenced my attitude toward the challenges in this field. Although there are no issues of

personal or professional relationships between the participants and me, there was the potential bias in regard to my long-term professional contact with the administrator of the organization. The administrator was not directly involved in the research project and had not had access to any identifying information of the participants. She retired from the agency prior to the conclusion of this study.

Methodology

Participants

All but one of the participants for this study had a minimum of a bachelor's degree in a social science field with an age range between 25 and 65. The participants were predominantly female, as this is true in the field of child welfare in general. Participants were required to have at least 1 year of experience in the field of child welfare and to have engaged in E-learning as a professional development strategy. A purposeful sampling strategy was used to select participants most likely to have the ability to provide information that would answer the research questions related to child welfare professionals' motivation to engage in E-learning at work.

The criteria for inclusion in the selection process was that the participant was employed as a child welfare case manager, supervisor, or program director by the participating agency and had access to the E-learning program. The differing roles were part of the selection process to ensure diversity of perspective. The research director of the agency provided a list of e-mail addresses for case managers employed by the agency. The recruitment process included an e-mail invitation to prospective participants to participate in the interview process. When participants responded positively to the

invitation to participate, I scheduled a time and place for the interview that accommodated requests of participants. At the outset of the interview, I explained the details of the research project, the purpose and rationale, the voluntary nature of participation, any risks involved in participating, and the process of volunteering to participate. Prior to the actual interview, each participant signed an informed consent.

Sample sizes for qualitative studies are often smaller than those used in a quantitative project, at least partially due to issues of saturation, which occurs when continued data collection does not result in any new insights regarding the topic of study (Mason, 2010). In case study, the unit of analysis may be an individual, group, process, or organization (Yin, 2009). For this project, the unit of analysis was the individual, and each informant participated in an in-depth, semistructured interview that led to the rich, thick description associated with qualitative research. Due to the depth of data gathered, a smaller sample size resulted in greater manageability and opportunity for exploration of the perspective of the child welfare professional (Stake, 1995). The number of participants necessary to reach the point of saturation must remain flexible (Marshall, 1996), so the goal of eight to 10 informants was the starting point for this study. After interviewing eight participants with different work roles, the point of saturation was reached.

Measures

Information was gathered through semistructured interviews using a protocol that provided participants an opportunity to share their perceptions and understanding of

motivation to engage in E-learning at work. A copy of the interview questions may be found in Appendix A. All interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim.

Data Collection

When participant selection was complete, in-person interviews were scheduled to last no longer than 1 ½ hours. Due to the tight schedule of the workers, the interviews lasted between 30 minutes and an hour. All interviews were conducted during a 3-week period. Interviews were held in a location chosen by the participant to ensure that the participants were not identified as such within the work environment and were audio recorded and later transcribed verbatim. I maintained a chain of evidence by recording the time, date, and place of all interviews. Following the collection of data and initial analysis, a 15- minute follow-up telephone interview was conducted to allow for member checking.

Data Analysis

The interview questions presented in Appendix A were used to obtain information regarding motivation to engage in a E-learning program as it related to relevance of content, impact of work environment, ease of use of the program, and the learner's state of well-being at the time of engagement. The data analysis for this case study began with a reading of the transcripts of interviews followed by a coding and theming process that identified phrases and/or sentences relevant to the study in relation to the previously mentioned research questions. Following the coding and theming, I used a comparison analysis of themes and pattern matching logic procedure to explore responses to the research questions. Discrepant cases are those interviews that might reveal information

providing a perspective contrary to the majority of information gathered. To avoid anchoring to initial conclusions, I factored the discrepant cases into the overall analysis of data throughout the process of data analysis.

Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, trustworthiness and rigor are the constructs used to measure what quantitative studies would refer to as reliability and validity (Creswell, 2007). Guba (1981) described the constructs of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as being to qualitative research what internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity are to quantitative studies. Credibility is considered one of the primary issues in qualitative research and is established by the use of research methods that have been shown to be successful in the past (Shenton, 2004).

In the case of this project, I used a case study, which has been proven an effective research method for exploring and/or describing a phenomenon that has received little research attention in the past (Yin, 2009). Prolonged engagement is another strategy used to ensure credibility of the study (Shenton, 2004), but is not possible for this study. However, I have experience both in the field of child welfare and in E-learning, thus increasing my familiarity with the topic of study and decreasing the need for a prolonged engagement. Eliciting honest responses from research participants is also a concern during a qualitative research project in relation to credibility of the research (Shenton, 2004). To increase the probability of truthful responses from participants, I made certain that participants understood the importance of honesty in regard to producing accurate

results, as well as the voluntary nature of the interview and the confidentiality of their responses.

Transferability, the idea that the results of one study might be generalized to a larger population, is considered unlikely in a case study design (Shenton, 2004).

However, Stake (1994) argued that in spite of the uniqueness of a case, there is also a possibility that the conclusions drawn from one case might transfer to similar cases should the same research design be used. My intent was to provide a rich contextual description of the case to provide the reader with the opportunity to compare situations and find relevant similarities to increase the likelihood that such a transfer might occur.

Dependability is established when a researcher uses techniques that would allow other researchers to obtain similar results should the same research methods be used within a similar context and with similar participants. By reporting details of the methods of the research design that includes the processes of data collection and analysis, the likelihood that this would occur increases. A detailed record of the research process also allows the reader to assess the effectiveness of the methods used (Shenton, 2004).

Confirmability is comparable to objectivity in a quantitative study, and it is imperative in establishing that my biases are acknowledged and shared within the case study report. To this end, I kept a research journal wherein I recorded a description of the research methods I used to create an audit trail. In addition, I recorded my reflections on the process. This process of critical self-reflection and self-awareness is referred to as reflexivity and is a significant factor in ensuring confirmability (Shenton, 2004).

Ethical Considerations

A copy of the participating agency's letter of consent to allow data collection for this project is found in Appendix B. Application for the institutional review board approval of this project dealing with human subjects was submitted and approved prior to any data collection. Due to the complexity of ethical considerations in qualitative research in regard to the use of human subjects, I made certain that the participants' rights were protected. Anyone participating in this study was provided full disclosure of the purpose of the project as well as information as to how confidentiality and anonymity would be upheld. During the recruitment process, I obtained e-mail addresses for all case managers within the agency from the agency's research director. The information as to who responded to the e-mail and chose to participate were held in confidence. Prior to each interview, I explained the voluntary nature of participation and any risks involved in participating.

Because I explored the participants' experience at work relating to their motivation to engage in the E-learning program provided by their employer, all data collected were considered confidential and were not accessible to the employer. All recordings and transcriptions of interviews are kept in a locked file cabinet in my office and will be destroyed 5 years after the completion of the project.

Summary

In Chapter 3, I addressed the rationale for using a single case study design in an effort to tell the story of rural child welfare professionals in one private child welfare agency as they engage, or not, in the E-learning program provided by their agency as part

of a comprehensive workforce development program. This chapter also contained information about the methodology and plan for data collection and analysis. Finally, I addressed how I intended to ensure the trustworthiness and ethical nature of the study.

In Chapter 4, I will discuss the data analysis.

Chapter 4: Results

This qualitative case study was conducted to explore the lived experiences of rural child welfare professionals interacting with an agency-provided E-learning program as a training delivery system. Rural child welfare is unique in that professional development activities are not easily accessed without investment in time and money (Roeder, 2009). Therefore, E-learning is being explored as a more cost- and time-effective training delivery system.

This study was designed to address questions relating to the motivation of the child welfare professional to engage in the E-learning activities in place in the participating private child welfare agency. In this chapter, I will describe the setting in which this study occurred, demographics of research participants, the organizational conditions that influenced volunteer participation, a review of the data collection and analysis process, evidence of trustworthiness of the study, and the results of the study organized according to research questions.

My central research question was the following: How do rural child welfare professionals in a private child welfare agency describe their motivation to engage in an agency-sponsored E-learning program?

Subquestion #1: How do these professionals perceive characteristics of the work environment as affecting their motivation to engage in E-learning?

Subquestion #2: How do these professionals perceive the ease of use of the agency's E-learning program as affecting their motivation to engage in E-learning?

Subquestion #3: How do these professionals perceive the relevance of the content in the agency's E-learning program as impacting their motivation to engage in E-learning?

Subquestion #4: How do these professionals perceive their personal feelings of well-being impacting their motivation to engage in E-learning?

Setting

A Midwestern private child welfare agency was purposely selected to obtain information regarding the interaction between rural child welfare professionals and agency-provided E-learning courses. Due to a previous employment experience 10 years prior to this study, I had a relationship with one administrator within the agency.

Although this administrator was not in a position that directly supervised my position during my employment, I knew her as a colleague and was aware of the agency's current involvement with E-learning as a professional development strategy. My professional relationship with this administrator was a key factor in selecting this agency as a research site, developing the research questions, and in facilitating access to research participants, which proved to be challenging even with the support of the agency.

Per their promotional website, the participating agency reported their purpose was to provide services for children and families that helps parents provide a nurturing environment. To meet these goals, the agency employed over 800 people and had office sites across four Midwestern and Southeastern states. The locations used for this project were all in one Midwestern state. Prevention, intervention, and follow-up services are offered through programs that include early learning and child development centers,

community-based support services that deliver behavioral health, intact family support and youth services, as well as placement services for those children who have become wards of the state due to abuse, neglect, or abandonment. The office sites visited during the course of data collection were located in rural communities with populations under 55,000 and housed an average of fewer than 10 employees per site. The child welfare professionals interviewed provided intact family support services to counties with populations between 16,233 and 53,873 with inhabitants that were primarily White (average of 95%). All research participants were also White.

The rural nature of the participating agency was of relevance to this study due to the challenges of additional costs incurred when providing traditional face-to-face training (Roeder, 2009). The rural nature of the participating agency impacted not only access to training, but access to clients and services as well. Case managers spend a significant amount of time in travel transporting clients to and from appointments in addition to the time taken to make contact with clients.

Demographics

Participant Profiles

Nine child welfare professionals were interviewed during the course of the project. The data for one participant were lost due to technical issues resulting in a sample size of eight. All participants were certified as child welfare employees, which is referred to as CWEL (child welfare employee license), meaning that the worker passed a licensure exam given by the state licensing board. Seven of the eight participants were women with a range of experience in child welfare from 1 year to 26 years. The average

length of employment in the field was 13 ½ years. In regard to postsecondary education, four participants held master's degrees, three had completed bachelor's degrees, and one had a high school diploma only. The professionals interviewed included four who served in direct service positions and four in administrative/management positions. See Table I, for participant demographics.

Table I

Participant Demographics

Name	Yrs. Experience	**Licensure	Degree	Gender
Betty	3	CWEL; LCPC	MA	Female
Cathy	20	CWEL	HS	Female
Claire	12	CWEL	BA	Female
Dan	1	CWEL; LPC; CADC	BA	Male
Debbie	26	CWEL	BS	Female
Janet	9.5	CWEL	BA	Female
Mary	8	CWEL	MA	Female
Tammy	26.2	CWEL	BA	Female

*Note. Names are pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality of participants. ** CWEL: Child Welfare Professional License; LPC: Licensed Professional Counselor; LCPC: Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor; CADC: Certified Alcohol Drug Counselor*

Claire had 12 years of experience in the field of child welfare. Claire's work in a variety of positions throughout her career gave her a well- rounded perspective on the work of child welfare and how the work impacted the learning process as it occurs during E-learning activities.

Dan was new to this agency and to the field of child welfare at the time of our interview. However, he had worked in a variety of settings and positions during his extensive work history, which allowed him to compare the different work environments as they affected his E-learning experience.

Cathy had over 20 years of experience working with children and families. She had a high school diploma in addition to being licensed as a child welfare professional, a requirement for working in the field of child welfare in the state where she was employed. Cathy spent a significant amount of her work day outside the office to perform her assigned tasks. These experiences give her a unique perspective on integrating E-learning activities into a busy schedule that involved a lot of time on the road.

Janet had worked 9 1/2 years as a child welfare worker and held a bachelor of arts degree. She openly reported that she was not a fan of online learning due to the technological aspects. This vantage point was important to the study in that it was essential in developing an understanding of how a person's familiarity and comfort level with E-learning might impact the learning process.

Debbie had over 26 years of child welfare experience and held a bachelor of science degree. She served a rural population so had a lot of windshield time, which refers to the time a worker spends traveling from client to client, or office to client. As

Debbie explained, this particular aspect of the work results in a daily conflict of how she will use her time. Spending almost 50% of her time in travel, Debbie then is faced with the decision as to how to spend what few hours she has left to complete paperwork, including required E-learning activities.

Tammy also had 26 years of experience in child welfare for the participating agency. She had a bachelor's degree in psychology and was a licensed child welfare employee. Due to her many years of experience in the field and being with this agency throughout her career, she was able to provide a perspective that included an in-depth understanding of agency professional development strategies over the course of several years.

Mary obtained a master's degree in developmental psychology. She had 8 years of experience in the field of child welfare. Mary compared and contrasted the E-learning program of her prior employer to this one. Due to her various roles within the field of child welfare throughout her career, she was also able to enrich the information obtained in this study by sharing her experience with observing the challenges and issues that direct service workers often face.

Betty had 3 years of experience in the field of child welfare. She presented as interested in E-learning and the impact the work environment might have on motivation to engage in the learning process. Betty had a unique vantage point in that she was new to the field of child welfare and interested in E-learning.

Data Collection

After sending electronic invitations to 42 prospective participants, I received no responses. A week later a second invitation was sent electronically, again without response. After filing an addendum with the Walden Institutional Review Board, I was permitted to make follow-up phone calls to make a more personal attempt at recruitment. One participant, Debbie, provided a narrative as to why she did not respond to the e-mails but immediately responded to the phone call request for participation. She reported to me that when she first saw my request, she quickly pushed it aside due to so many competing tasks. However, when she later received a phone message from me, she was touched by my plight, and could relate due to personal experiences, which led to her decision to participate in the study. Although this participant's situation was unique to her, I believe that the schedule of child welfare professionals in general was a barrier to participation in projects like this, thus denying a voice to those impacted by the training programs being developed and implemented.

Study procedures began with a review of the consent form and an explanation of the research. I then discussed with each participant the voluntary nature of participation, the interview process, and that the interview could be stopped at any time if requested by the interviewee. I also talked with each participant about the reason she or he had chosen to participate and expressed my gratitude for his or her time.

Individual, semistructured interviews occurred over the course of a 1-month period at differing locations that were chosen by the participant to ensure privacy and confidentiality. All interviews were audio recorded with the participant's written

permission and later transcribed verbatim. Interviews lasted from 20 minutes to 1 hour, depending on the participant's narrative. With prior IRB approval, I provided each participant with a 10-dollar Starbucks card at the conclusion of the interview in appreciation for their cooperation.

My original plan, as outlined in Chapter 3 of this document, was to allow for 1 to 1 ½ hour interviews, but during the recruitment phone calls, the prospective participants made it clear that committing to an hour or less was much more doable. Ultimately, the child welfare professionals carved out the time to participate in this project because, according to their reports, they wanted to have a voice in helping to create understanding in regard to the subject under study, specifically that of how the job they do impacts their motivation to engage in E-learning during a typical work day.

Data Analysis

The purpose of this case study was to address the research questions developed to answer issues around how child welfare professionals understand their motivation to engage in E-learning in relation to the impact of work environment, ease of use of the program, relevance of content of training, and a personal sense of well-being as it relates to the emotional impact of the job. I began the analysis process by transcribing all audio recorded interviews verbatim and creating case reports for each participant based on those interview transcripts. Based on Yin's (2009) analytic procedure of pattern matching, I repeatedly read the transcribed interviews noting what words, phrases, and/or sentences I found to be relevant to the study in relation to the overall research question and four subquestions outlined earlier in this chapter. I then grouped the data into themes

that related to the research questions, which were based on the hypothesized pattern that a learner's motivation is impacted by the factors addressed in the research subquestions. The four primary themes that transcended throughout cases were overall motivation to engage in E-learning was low because trainings are mandatory; work environment was a barrier to motivation to engage in E-learning activities at work; redundant and irrelevant content was a barrier to motivation to engage in E-learning; and workers' personal sense of well-being, as it relates to the emotional impact of the work, was a barrier to motivation to engage in E-learning.

Identified Themes

Theme 1: Mandatory Training a Barrier to Engage in E-learning

Five of the eight participants reported their only motivation to engage in E-learning at work as being because the trainings are mandatory. Janet had been working in child welfare for almost 10 years and said that she had zero motivation to complete the mandatory trainings. She said, "There's nothing learning about it. All it is to me is meeting a requirement." Claire said, "I just log on and get it done because it has to be done."

Debbie reported,

The motivation is that I have a training that I have to complete by such and such a date and this is the avenue which my agency has chosen to do trainings. So, it's just all about that. It's not a personal choice in any way, shape, or form. It's just what you have to do.

In response to the question regarding overall motivation to engage in E-learning, Tammy said, “The time deadline.”

There were few divergent responses. One such response came from Cathy, who said, “I do the mandatory trainings yearly, but I use it for more than that. I know at least once a year and probably two to three times, I get on there and just browse through the whole system. ”

Another came from Mary, who reported, “My motivation has been to become fully qualified to do my job.” Finally, Betty said,

I get on the computer for mandatory training and I also get on it to look for trainings for my staff, things that we may have on there that would help them with a difficult client, or it might be to just look for trainings for the year.

Theme 2: Work Environment a Barrier to Engage in E-learning

There was consensus among all eight respondents that a primary barrier to engaging in E-learning as professional development was that of a work environment with time restraints that require them to complete a variety of complex tasks within a brief amount of time.

Other comments about the work environment similarly reflected the competing tasks that occur during a typical work day that become a barrier to completing E-learning activities. Claire, talked about the complexity of dealing with families who remain intact and the importance of attempting to use services to correct the conditions that brought them to the attention of child welfare professionals. She said, “Intact family services is a

high-risk program dealing with kids and families that had hotline reports. This is a last-ditch effort to keep kids in their homes.” Claire insisted that taking time to complete a training online is a low priority, stating, “Families for me come first. And, they should be our first priority, not to be in front of the computer doing a training.”

Debbie, with 26 years of experience in child welfare responded to the question, “How does your work environment impact your motivation to engage in E-learning?” by explaining the working of a case as follows:

We spend the first 6 weeks with any family just trying to get to know them and to establish a relationship with them, a working relationship. And, during that time we get so much information on the family. We have to write what’s called an Integrated Assessment within the first 45 days. We have to have this Integrated Assessment completed, and it just has a lot of background information on parents and what have their life experiences to date that have brought them to the point they are now. We just get a lot of information that lets us get to know the family, to know what their issues are. And, with that information and the family’s help, we develop a service plan. That also has to be completed by the 45th day, which is 6 weeks into our service involvement. And, sometimes we’re making referrals from the minute we show up at the doorstep. There are some families you can’t wait 6 weeks to gather all this information before you get them into rehab or get them into counseling for mental health treatment or whatever.

This worker went on to say,

The thing that wears me more than anything is working 50 hours a week and working weekends just to catch up. Sometimes I feel like my whole life is work. The job is just too big. It's like a race. I get up every day, and it's like a race. I stop to go to the bathroom. I stop at a convenient store to get a bottle of water. I mean I'm not taking a lunch break. I'm not chit chatting for 30 minutes. You are just running. And, I think that's what is wearing me out.

Cathy, who's job responsibilities include providing direct service to families, reported that, "I do a lot of racing in and out of the office. Pretty much I just race around." She reported the responsibilities of her job to be transporting clients to appointments, providing parenting training and support, and networking with community agencies to ensure adequate service provision, leaving her little time to concentrate on E-learning activities during the work day.

Theme 3: Irrelevant Content a Barrier to Engage in E-Learning

It became apparent early on in the interviews that the E-learning program offered by the agency involved in the study was not being used to the fullest extent. Rather, the agency has engaged in limited use specifically for the purpose of annual mandatory trainings. The participants found the materials redundant in that they were required to take the same courses every year with little to no change in the information presented or the delivery format.

Cathy stated,

The mandatory trainings, I think are a tool of the devil [chuckle]. I think that they ought to, with each year you take them, they should have to add something new. I

really do. I think that people get so complacent about the whole thing. They just sleep walk through it.

Mary articulated a different perspective,

As I am getting older, I see the importance of those things. When I was younger if I had done the same training, and was in more of a case manager role, I don't think I would have been as engaged. But, as a supervisor, I understand the importance of all of it.

Tammy said, "I just sit there and hit next through the slides and then take the test.

It is mostly common sense"

Theme 4: Emotional Work a Barrier to Engage in E-Learning

When examining the data for the purpose of finding responses directly related to the participants' personal sense of well-being, the responses to my direct questions were often vague. Respondents reported that they do not spend a lot of time thinking about this aspect of learning. Mary explained,

It's not something I've thought about before. I think in this field you learn to problem solve and think quick on your feet. If it's something that needs to be done, like in my case, it's what I need to be licensed to do my job, then you assess it, do it, it's [personal sense of well-being] not something you mull over. You just jump in and get it [training] done. So, I think it could. It's just not something I've thought about before.

Upon further examination of the data, I found comments throughout the interviews that, although not directly related to personal sense of well-being, connected

with the emotionality of the job and how that presents as a barrier to engagement in E-learning.

All of the participants reported how the emotional nature of child welfare work and the subsequent vicarious trauma make it challenging for child welfare professionals to move from dealing with families in traumatic situations to learning mode for mandatory trainings with a specific deadline. However, perceptions regarding the management of this aspect of the job differed according to whether the respondent served in a management or direct service position. Betty reported, “Part of what I’m seeing, and this is my own opinion, it is the vicarious trauma, that emotional heaviness that leads them to believe that they don’t have time.”

Tammy made this comment about how emotionally draining the job is, when talking about how the emotional nature of the job is a barrier to her motivation to engage in E-learning.,

Some days are more emotionally draining than others. Folks with mental illness are very emotionally and mentally draining because you’re wanting to keep them on task and engage them and make sure they don’t get alarmed or upset.

Sometimes there are cases when clients are pretty emotional. There are times when you’re not wanted very much, and you can feel some fear or worry for your own safety.

Discrepant Cases

The information provided by participants in management positions differed from those working in direct service to families in relation to issues of time management and

the impact of the emotional nature of the job on a worker's motivation to engage in E-learning. The participants in management positions commented about the emotional impact of the work and the work environment in general from the perspective that the worker might bear at least some responsibility in managing time better and using self-care to address possible issues of vicarious trauma. This perception was different from responses from direct service workers, who perceived these same issues to be agency generated via high caseloads and unrealistic expectations as to what might be accomplished during regular work hours. These differing perspectives on the same issues are an important part of the findings from this research.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of this research is reflected in efforts to enhance credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

Credibility

My experience as a child protection worker for ten years, and as an online learner for the past nine years provided me with extensive experience in both areas under study, specifically, child welfare and E-learning. Having worked in the communities where the study was conducted allowed me the benefit of prolonged engagement with the local communities and populations under study. This familiarity allowed me to establish rapport and trust with participants and understand the contexts of their narratives.

After completing the coding of eight interviews, I made phone calls to participants to complete the member checking process. Participants were aware that this was expected of them before they agreed to participate in the study. After thanking them

for taking the time to speak with me again, I explained to each participant the primary themes I had extrapolated from the data and then asked for feedback on the accuracy of my conclusions. All participants agreed that my findings were an accurate representation of their reports. These phone calls lasted from 10-15 minutes.

Transferability

As with any research study, typically there is the question as to whether or not the conclusions drawn from these interviews would also apply to other child welfare professionals practicing in a variety of settings. Qualitative researchers view this issue as an open empirical question. The responsibility of the qualitative researcher is to provide sufficient detail and depth of description that others can judge the extent to which findings may transfer to their particular contexts. (Guba, 1981; Shenton, 2004). In the present study, rich description gained from interviews with a small number of participants will allow the reader to consider the applicability of the experiences, contexts and concepts presented here with other settings.

Dependability

I have outlined the details of the data collection and analysis process in order to assist those interested in conducting similar research.

Confirmability

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim to establish a clear audit trail. In addition, I practiced reflexivity throughout the study to maintain as neutral a stance as possible. I reflected on each interview immediately following the conclusion of the interview and during the transcription of the same. My experience in child welfare was a constant motivator during my planning of this study and while conducting interviews. I was well aware of this and continually questioned myself as to what probes I was using. There were times when I went into a line of questioning that had less to do

with my specific research questions and more to do with my empathy and compassion for the research participants as they reported the complexity and emotional aspects of the job with which I am personally familiar. Although my background in child welfare colored my perception of the interviews and perhaps influenced my line of questioning at times, I have made a concerted effort to use my awareness of this bias to assist me in using caution when analyzing the data and drawing any conclusions.

Results

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experience of rural child welfare professionals who are expected to utilize an agency directed E-learning program to receive information the agency, under the direction of federal law, has deemed mandatory to maintain the skills necessary to perform the job functions expected of them. This training strategy is new to the field of child welfare which led to the primary research question regarding a worker's overall motivation to engage in the learning activities provided by the participating agency.

Subquestions were developed to probe deeper into the workers' perceived barriers and supports regarding engagement in the learning process. They centered around the issues of work environment, ease of use of the program, relevance of content, and personal sense of well-being as it relates to the emotional impact of the work. The information that follows will provide explanation as to how the themes from the study relate to the research questions.

In an effort to better understand how child welfare professionals are responding to the training strategy of E-learning, the overall research question for this study was:

How do rural child welfare professionals in a private child welfare agency describe their motivation to engage in an agency sponsored E-learning program?

In response to this question, the interview data was clear that the overall motivation to engage in E-learning was the fact that the training is mandatory. There were three exceptions who reported that they sometimes explored the E-learning program in search of additional trainings that might be beneficial to them in their differing roles. Those in management positions were more likely to report using the program to search out trainings that might either help them in being qualified to do the job or be used in the professional development of the staff they supervise.

In addition to having no motivation to complete the E-learning activities, with the exception that they are mandatory, participants talked about low expectations of learning. Janet said, "I really don't have any expectations. I'm really more worried about how long this is going to take because I've got shit to do." Tammy reported, "I don't go in with any expectations. I know it's going to be redundant."

Those in management positions were more likely to respond that they saw value in the training and were motivated to use the training system in their administrative role. One participant in a management position said she was motivated by a desire to become fully qualified for her job. Another participant reported that she is motivated by a desire to locate trainings that she could use to help the staff she supervises in developing professionally.

Subquestion #1: How do these professionals perceive characteristics of the work environment as affecting their motivation to engage in E-learning?

There was consensus among all participants, whether in administrative or direct service roles, that the work environment of child welfare is a barrier to engaging in training while at work. The participants all worked in the intact services program, which serves families that are allowed to remain intact during a child welfare intervention. This means that the risk to the children has not risen to a level that would require the children be removed from parents and placed in substitute care. When asked how the work environment is a barrier to engaging in E-learning, Claire stressed the gravity of the situations the workers are addressing during any given work day and described intact services as follows,

Intact family services is a high-risk program dealing with kids and families that had hotline reports. This is a last-ditch effort to keep kids in their homes. The worker works with the kids in their home settings and in school settings when appropriate. It could be the worker is helping parents learn new parenting techniques to keep them from abusing their children.

Those serving in direct service positions also verbalized concern as to expectations that they would complete E-learning at work when the work they do is of such a serious nature. In this case Debbie talked about the stress of helping families stabilize. She explained what a typical case might involve.

All of our clients are referred to us by DCFS. They have all been the recipients of a hotline report alleging either abuse or neglect or whatever. So, each family that is referred to us has been deemed to have a problem with hope some intervention services they can become more stable and the children can remain at home.

Tammy also discussed the competing tasks she faces during her work day. She emphasized the importance of ensuring child safety, thus leaving less time for training activities.

I might be doing home visits, transporting clients to appointments. Some visits are scheduled some are unscheduled, so you gotta make sure the kids are safe. You gotta see the kids every visit and see what's going on with the individuals or families.

All respondents were in agreement that child welfare is a job that involves management of competing tasks, which impact the worker's ability to set aside a specific time to focus on E-learning activities in a way that would lead to learning and/or understanding of the information being provided.

Subquestion #2: How do these professionals perceive the ease of use of the agency's E-learning program as affecting their motivation to engage in E-learning?

This particular question did not yield a lot of data. In fact, 100% of research participants referred to the program as easy to use. They found the technology to be user friendly and completing specific trainings to be a matter of working through slides and answering questions after reviewing the slides. The courses are a pass/fail and workers are allowed unlimited attempts to get a passing score. However, the ease of using the course was not reported to impact the motivation to engage in E-learning activities.

When asked if the E-learning program was easy to use, Dan said, "I think it's pretty easy." Debbie described it as, "Very easy, a piece of cake." Although no one reported the E-learning program being difficult to use, it is also true that no participants

talked about the ease of use as being a factor in their motivation to complete mandatory trainings.

Subquestion #3: How do these professionals perceive the relevance of the content in the agency's E-learning program as impacting their motivation to engage in E-learning?

Because the agency is currently using the E-learning program primarily for the purpose of mandatory trainings that are required to be completed annually, participants related their experience regarding relevance of content to these six to eight mandatory trainings to be that of a review of material that had been covered previously. The theme relating to this sub-question was that the content of the mandatory trainings is both irrelevant and redundant. This perception was more commonly held by direct service workers than by those in administrative roles. Cathy articulated an interest in exploring other trainings within the program if she had more time to do so. In regard to the mandatory trainings she made the comment, "I think that people get so complacent about the whole thing. They just sleep walk through it." Tammy made a similar comment that, "I know it's going to be redundant. I don't think anybody is gettin' anything out of it." Debbie described the trainings as "mostly common sense".

Administrators reported that although the mandatory trainings are similar every year, they do contain information that is considered important by the federal government. One participant in a management position said, "As a supervisor, I need to know all of these things." She reported her understanding that a seasoned child welfare professional likely has the knowledge that is being provided in the annual mandatory trainings, but

they are mandated by the government and must be completed annually. She added, “These trainings are better for the newer workers.”

The redundancy of content in the annual mandatory trainings was a primary theme as it related to a barrier to the motivation to engage in E-learning. Direct service workers talked about not having any choice in the content and how that led to a decrease in motivation to engage in the trainings. Some participants spoke of finding something relevant if you were looking for it. Dan said, “It can be educational because sometimes you’re able to pull something out of it.”

Betty said,

If you come to the task with the ambition to learn, your chance of success is higher. I feel like if you’re kind of mundane and you’re really not wanting to learn, you probably won’t.

Subquestion #4: How do these professionals perceive their personal feelings of well-being impacting their motivation to engage in E-learning?

This question by itself did not yield a lot of data as participants reported not thinking much about how they are feeling at any given time. The work is described as taking up all of a person’s time, energy, and thoughts with little opportunity for reflection on self. However, when I asked probing questions regarding the emotional aspects of the job, participants shared how the emotional connection with the children and families involved and a genuine concern for them results in emotional distress at times, which creates a barrier to motivation to spend time in E-learning activities.

Dan talked about just getting out of a meeting that was emotional. He said, “You wanna see the best. You want these families to succeed.” Mary talked about vicarious trauma and how when workers go home at night with the struggles of the families they work with on their mind, “it can take a toll.” She further explained that there is an emotional heaviness that goes with the job that can interfere with a worker’s motivation to learn as well as ability to manage their time well and complete the tasks of their job with a degree of excellence expected by the agency and the families served.

Tammy spoke at length about experiencing the death of a child on her caseload and how that impacted her both personally and professionally. She reported that she feels more in touch with the gravity of the decisions she makes since this incident occurred. One case manager, Janet, reported that after more than 9 years in this field she can simply no longer afford to get emotionally invested with her clients. She said that she adopted this philosophy after she began to see her own physical and mental health decline when she took the job home with her.

Discrepant Cases

Four of the eight participants were involved with direct service work in the field of child welfare. The four people who were in administration as supervisor or program director reported similar issues to the direct service workers. However, those in management positions had a different vantage point from direct service workers. Direct service workers viewed time pressures as a primary obstacle to E-learning. In contrast, a program director, responded to the issue of “no time for training” with “some of it is

time, some of it is efficiency and effectiveness.” She attributed this lack of time management, at least in part, to worker’s suffering from vicarious trauma.

Summary

Throughout the collection of data for this study, it was apparent that the work of a child welfare professional is stressful, emotional, demanding, and of great importance in ensuring the safety and well-being of one of society’s most vulnerable populations, children and families involved in a child welfare intervention. The overall research question addressed during the interviews with participants was how child welfare professionals describe their motivation to engage in E-learning as a professional development strategy. The sub-questions were intended to obtain information regarding the impact the areas of (a) work environment; (b) relevance of content; (c) ease of use; and (d) personal sense of well-being had on motivation to engage in the E-learning process. The four themes that resulted from the analysis of the data are: (a) overall motivation to engage in E-learning was low because trainings are mandatory; (b) work environment was a barrier to motivation to engage in E-learning activities at work; (c) redundant and irrelevant content was a barrier to motivation to engage in E-learning; (d) the worker’s sense of well-being, as it relates to the emotional impact of the work, was a barrier to motivation to engage in E-learning.

In response to the overall motivation to engage in E-learning, the participants in direct service roles made it clear that they were not motivated at all to interrupt a busy work day to sit in front of the computer and complete mandatory trainings that were perceived to be redundant and irrelevant to development as a professional or impacting

the professionals' daily tasks in a positive way. However, those in management positions were more likely to use the program for professional development for themselves or the staff they supervise.

The work environment was described as overwhelming, emotional, stressful, impossible and as a significant barrier to engagement in the E-learning process. Although the agency provided E-learning program used by the participating child welfare agency was described as user friendly technologically speaking, this did not have a positive effect on the participant's motivation to complete the assigned courses. Participants described sleep walking through the trainings, just click, click, clicking to get through the material as quickly as possible, and having to complete the trainings at home rather than during work hours.

In Chapter 5, I will be interpreting the findings presented in this chapter as well as describing the limitations to the study and any recommendations for further research. Finally, I will discuss the implications for positive social change and practice recommendations.

Chapter 5: Findings and Conclusions

It is imperative that child welfare agencies maintain a well-trained workforce to fulfill the charge given to them by the federal government regarding service interventions with children and families in crisis, making continued professional development and training a necessity (Collins et al., 2010; Nguyen, 2012). Due to budgetary restraints and increasingly high caseloads, the need for a financially responsible and flexible training delivery system for child welfare professionals has become a priority for many agencies (Collins et al., 2010). As a result, E-learning, which is considered to meet both of these criteria, has increased in popularity as an option for training within the field of child welfare (Batalla-Busquests & Pacheco-Bernal, 2013).

The rationale for this study was based on the qualitative research principle that understanding a developing phenomenon is best accomplished by exploring the perspective of the participant. It was my intention that the data obtained in this study were helpful in increasing an understanding of how child welfare professionals explain their motivation to engage in the process of E-learning at work and provide a basis for policy or procedures that will support training efforts in the field of child welfare.

The primary research question driving this study was the following: How do rural child welfare professionals in a private child welfare agency describe their motivation to engage in an agency sponsored E-learning program? The four subquestions were

1. How do these professionals perceive characteristics of the work environment as affecting their motivation to engage in E-learning?

2. How do these professionals perceive the ease of use of the agency's E-learning program as affecting their motivation to engage in E-learning?
3. How do these professionals perceive the relevance of the content in the agency's E-learning program as impacting their motivation to engage in E-learning?
4. How do these professionals perceive their personal feelings of well-being impacting their motivation to engage in E-learning?

I found that the research participants had little to no motivation to engage in this program besides the fact that completion of annual trainings was mandated by the participating agency. Both the stressful work environment and content that was perceived as redundant and irrelevant presented as barriers to the professionals' motivation to engage in E-learning. The agency's E-learning program as being reportedly easy to use was not recognized as a motivating factor in engaging in the training activity. Finally, the participants provided narratives regarding the emotional aspects of working with families in a child welfare crisis and how this negatively impacted their well-being; they did not make the connection that this aspect of the work impacted their motivation to engage in E-learning. However, those in administrative positions discussed the impact of vicarious trauma, often experienced by direct service workers, as a barrier to the learning experiences of employees they had supervised.

In this chapter, I will provide an interpretation of the findings from this study exploring the lived experience of rural child welfare professionals as it relates to the overall motivation to engage in an agency sponsored E-learning program. In addition, I

will address limitations of the study and make recommendations for further research. Finally, I will discuss the implications for positive social change.

Interpretation of Findings

Theme 1: Mandatory Training a Barrier to Engage in E-learning.

The findings from this study in regard to overall motivation of child welfare professionals to engage in E-learning were consistent with adult learning theory as set forth by Westover (2009); adults, unlike children, cannot be coerced into learning. Participants reported that they were not involved in choosing the content of the training or when and how it would be delivered. The reported overall motivation to use the E-learning program was that the agency mandated the trainings be done annually to comply with federal regulations. If the trainings were not completed within the designated time frame, the child welfare professional would receive a less than satisfactory yearly evaluation. If the workers are completing the training solely due to an agency requirement, it is less likely that learning will occur (Mirci & Hensley, 2010; Sansone et al., 2011).

Participants in direct service positions reported that they do not pay attention to the content of the training; rather, the objective was to complete the training or “just get it done” to avoid punitive action from their employer. Adults prefer a self-regulated learning experience in which they choose the content of the training to ensure the expectancy of learning (Sansone et al., 2011). The participants in this study confirmed that they preferred a self-directed activity that allows flexibility in scheduling, but that the

flexibility did not act as a motivating factor to engage in the learning activity, supporting the idea that the content of any training is the more important catalyst for engagement.

Although all participants reported the mandatory nature of the training as being the primary motive for engagement, five of the eight respondents were interested in other aspects of the training program, especially administrative staff who used the program to seek ways to improve performance of direct service workers. This information is also consistent with adult learning theory in that those in a supervisory role reported an interest in the topics and thus able to find usefulness in the E-learning activities, at least partially due to the responsibilities of the position they held (Sansone et al., 2011; Westover, 2009).

Theme 2: Work Environment a Barrier to Engage in E-Learning

Child welfare work is recognized as being stressful, complex, and involving daily tasks that are nonroutine and life altering for clients (Collins et al., 2010). Gardner and Yun (2010) referred to this type of work as occurring in HROs like medical treatment or law enforcement. Although, they do not mention child welfare within the context of their work, I would argue that the experiences within these fields are similar. Gardner and Yun posited that the contextual factors in HRO's had an impact on the learning process. The results of their study support the argument that this is also true in child welfare.

All of the research participants reported that the nature of child welfare work was a barrier to learning at work using an online format. This finding is congruent with adult learning theory (Westover, 2009) and the work of Collins et al. (2010) regarding the

emphasis on worker ability in provision of services and the impact the complex child welfare tasks have on learning.

The work environment in an HRO, such as law enforcement, medical treatment, and child welfare, requires that the professionals employed be current on the latest empirically supported interventions in order to be competent in performing tasks that involve invasive, but necessary interventions, to individuals and families (Gardner & Yun, 2010). The caveat is that the work tasks requiring ongoing professional development creates a work environment that inhibits the worker from engaging in such training.

Theme 3: Irrelevant Content a Barrier to Engage in E-learning.

Adults are intrinsically motivated to learn when they are convinced that a goal is being met and the information they are learning is applicable to them in their daily lives. Adults who are forced to learn are resistant and the learning process is ineffective (Knowles, 1980). Because the trainings discussed by these research participants were mandatory and completed annually, workers found the content redundant and irrelevant. This irrelevance of content was reported by all participants to be a barrier to motivation to learn because the information was known and was not perceived as helpful in completing the day-to-day work tasks.

Merriam (2008) posited that self-regulation of motivation within the work place is impacted by the learner's past experiences, applicability of content, and the learning environment. The findings from this study are congruent with this statement in that one of the barriers to motivation to engage in E-learning was the lack of applicability of

content. Participants had repeated these trainings yearly, some for several years, and believed they knew the information. It was no longer considered to be applicable or of interest to them, rather redundant.

Theme 4: Emotional Work a Barrier to Engage in E-Learning.

The work of child welfare involves providing appropriate services to families involved in a child welfare intervention. This process is invasive and often unwanted (Collins et al., 2010), thus creating an emotional response from both the client and the child welfare professional. The child welfare professionals in my study spoke of having a child on their caseload die, dealing with resistant and sometimes combative clients, and facing the unpleasant and emotional task of removing a child from their family of origin. They reported being drained emotionally at times, taking work home with them, and often wondering if they were doing all that they could to ensure the safety of children. Two participants in administrative roles mentioned vicarious trauma and how not enough is being done to support workers' psychological well-being around this situation.

The scholarly discussion around E-learning as a professional development strategy thus far has been focused on issues of flexibility in disseminating information and fiscal responsibility for the agency (Collin et al., 2010; Donavant, 2009). Although adult learning theory and theories of motivation have helped to frame the discussion regarding professional development in the workplace, there have been few studies addressing the impact an emotional and stressful job might have on motivation and engagement. According to reports from the research participants in this study, the

expectation that they be motivated to engage in E-learning in the midst of a work day that involves emotional strain is unrealistic.

Findings and the Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was adult learning theory (Knowles, 1980; Westover, 2009) and how adult learners self-regulate the motivation to engage in E-learning for professional development activities related to work. The basic premise of adult learning theory is that adults learn differently than children and they have a psychological need to be self-directed (Westover, 2009). Sansone and Thomas (2005) developed the Self-Regulation of Motivation (SRM) model to suggest that adult learning is either goal defined and motivated by an expectancy of learning or experience defined and motivated by an interest in a specific topic.

According to the first tenet of SRM, self-regulation is driven by motivation, which is fueled by a desire to reach a specific goal (Sansone, et al, 2011). Participants in this study reported that the E-learning training they are mandated to complete is somewhat self-regulated in the sense that they have the flexibility to complete the learning activity according to differing schedules. However much the participants appreciated this flexibility of scheduling, it was not enough to increase motivation to engage in the E-learning activity as the goal regarding expectancy of learning was nonexistent.

Participants, especially those in direct service positions, were concerned with the redundancy and irrelevance of content, over which they had no control, thus violating the second tenet of SRM, the need for material to be of interest to the learner. Those in

administrative positions were more likely than their direct service counterparts to understand the rationale for the mandatory trainings, which translated into added value of completing the mandatory training. All participants agreed that they would prefer to decide what and how they would learn (Mirci & Hensley, 2010; Westover, 2009), but, in mandatory trainings, these choices are not available.

The adult learning process is impacted by the learner's past experiences, applicability of content, and the learning environment (Merriam, 2008). In the case of the child welfare professionals interviewed for this study, they were not given credit for past training experiences. The mandatory trainings delivered to them annually were reported to contain the exact same information in an identical format year after year. Four of the participants discussed feeling that their past learning experiences were discounted in that the process was repeated annually. Although those in management positions could understand the purpose of repeating the same training on ethics, sexual harassment, and blood borne pathogens year after year, the participants serving in direct service positions did not find it at all applicable to the work tasks they are involved in daily. The learning environment, the work environment in this case, was of particular interest in this study.

All of the participants reported that learning while at work in an HRO like child welfare challenged their motivation. Participants described a work environment that caused them to deal with competing tasks on a daily basis and completing an E-learning activity was a low priority in comparison to the tasks involving the safety and well-being of children for whom they felt responsible. The field of child welfare is complex, stressful, and emotionally charged. This is consistent with both adult learning theory and

self-regulation of learning theory in that the two most important factors in engaging adult learners are content that is of interest to the learner and an expectancy that learning will occur, not ease of use (Merriam, 2008, Westover, 2009).

Limitations of the study

One limitation of this study was the small number of participants, which was due largely to the inaccessibility of child welfare professionals. Due to the qualitative nature of the study, the small number of participants was helpful in obtaining a rich description of the lived experience of the research participants. The point of saturation was reached after eight interviews.

Another limitation is the lack of diversity in geographic locations of research sites since all were rural. This was purposefully done to allow me to collect information that would be relatable for other rural child welfare agencies. All research participants were white. The race/ethnicity of participants was similar to that of the population served. Seven of the eight participants were women, which is a reflection of gender differences in the field of child welfare.

Finally, the E-learning program was being used only for mandated trainings at the time of this study. The program has the capability of delivering other types of professional development training but was not being used as such at the time the interviews were taking place. Therefore, the findings from this study are only applicable to mandatory trainings.

Recommendations

This study was exploratory in nature to obtain information from rural child welfare professionals about the lived experience of working in an HRO and engaging in mandatory E-learning activities within the work environment. Although participants provided a rich description of a typical work day and how competing tasks and redundant and irrelevant content present as barriers to the learning process, further research using a mixed methods approach is recommended to add quantitative data describing the relationship between time spent on specific training and level of motivation of the learner.

The findings from this study bring to light the differences in motivation to engage in E-learning activities between those in administrative roles and those in direct service positions. I recommend further studies around this issue to better understand the how and why of the impact of the worker's role on motivation to engage in E-learning.

Due to the limited sample size taken from one geographical location, future research needs to be conducted on a larger population from rural locations in different states. It would be beneficial to replicate the methods used in this study in these different locations for a comparison of experiences.

As discussed throughout this study, the work of child welfare is complex, stressful, and emotional in that it requires invasive interventions that impact the lives of vulnerable children and families. Ongoing professional development is a must, and whether or not an E-learning program is able to effectively deliver this type of training is unknown. Further studies regarding the use of E-learning for these trainings is needed.

Implications

Positive Social Change

In 2014, there were approximately 702,000 maltreated children in the United States, a rate of 9.4 per thousand (Child Trends, 2017). When these children and families become involved with the child welfare system, the expectation is that the child welfare professionals involved in serving the families will have adequate training and expertise to address the issues that brought the family to the attention of the child welfare agency. The use of evidence informed practice is key to successful outcomes for the involved families (Collins-Camargo & Garstka, 2014).

This study was designed to develop a clearer understanding of the motivation of rural child welfare professionals to engage in E-learning activities as part of an agency professional development program. The trainings discussed by participants were mandated by the federal government and were to be completed annually. Continuing education of child welfare professionals is thought to be an effective means of maintaining a well-trained and competent workforce who are expected to deliver quality services to one of society's most vulnerable populations, children at risk of or actually involved in situations of maltreatment by caregivers.

Although, the trainings discussed in this study were mandatory, there is opportunity for professional development trainings around a variety of topics to be delivered in an E-learning format. The question then becomes whether or not trainings in this venue are effective in increasing the competency of the child welfare professional. Further research is needed to explore this idea.

For the purposes of this study, the social change implications are that delivery of training in the most flexible and cost-efficient manner is not necessarily the best option. Delivering child welfare intervention services that are of the highest quality is a mandate, not only from the federal government, but from a compassionate society. Only when effort is made to effectively train child welfare professionals will there be a change in outcomes for children and families.

Practice Implications

Rural child welfare professionals, working in an HRO, are faced daily with a non-routine work environment wherein they are expected to make life and death decisions that impact the safety and well-being of children. Having a well-trained and effective workforce is imperative in producing positive outcomes for vulnerable children and families. It is widely accepted among child welfare agencies that E-learning is a more flexible and fiscally responsible training venue. However, this study provides information that the flexibility and financial savings are of little importance to the child welfare professionals the training is intended to impact.

The key findings from this study, that learners are indeed self-regulated, the context in which the learning is expected to occur matters, and content must be relevant to the learner, could be instrumental in developing E-learning strategies for child welfare professionals that meet these criteria. When training is developed with the feedback from workers in mind, training will more likely be effective in maintaining a competent workforce.

If the premise is accepted that well-trained workers are positively correlated with improved outcomes for children and families undergoing a child welfare intervention, it becomes imperative that E-learning strategies be used with caution and only after considerable consideration has been given to the issues of work environment and relevance of content as discussed in this study.

Conclusion

Child welfare professionals engage daily in the work of ensuring the safety and well-being of children involved in service interventions due to maltreatment by a caregiver. These cases of maltreatment range from neglect in the area of supervision or provision of adequate shelter, food, and clothing to severe physical or sexual abuse. This population is one of the most vulnerable of society, often facing issues of domestic violence, poverty, substance abuse, and mental illness. The success or failure of interventions delivered to these families impacts not only the families involved in a child welfare intervention, but the communities in which they live, and society in general.

The expectation of society is that the child welfare professionals delivering such significant services to children and families will have adequate training and resources to complete their charge to ensure the safety and well-being of children and assess the family for service needs. It should be evident that ongoing training is a necessity in maintaining a highly skilled and effective child welfare workforce.

Due to advances in technology and budgetary restraints, E-learning is rapidly becoming a chosen vehicle for the delivery of trainings in the field. A factor that needs to be considered continually is the reaction of the learner, the child welfare professional. As

useful as E-learning programs might be as vehicles for training delivery because of the convenience and low cost, the findings from this study are an indicator that factors such as the impact of work environment, relevance of content, and the emotional aspects of learning must be considered in the development of policies and procedures related to ongoing professional development.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

1. How long have you been employed as a child welfare professional?
2. Do you hold any licenses or certifications?
3. Have you used this agency's e-learning program?
 - a. If the response is no, pursue a line of questioning as to why they have been allowed to forego participation in professional development as required by their agency?
 - b. If the response is yes, continue with questions 4 through 9.
4. How often do you access the agency's e-learning program?
 - a. When you log in, is it due to a mandatory training?
 - b. If not, what types of learning activities are of interest to you?
5. What is your motivation to engage with the e-learning program?
 - a. How would you describe what you are thinking about as you are logging into the e-learning program? What are your expectations of the experience?
 - b. Generally speaking, are you logging into the e-learning program to complete an assignment or out of interest in the subject or for some other reason?
6. How does your work environment impact your motivation to engage with the e-learning program?
 - a. What is a typical day on the job like for you?
 - b. Does the work you do ever interfere with your motivation to use your agency's e-learning program? If yes, please explain.
7. How do you perceive the ease of use and its impact on your motivation to engage with the e-learning program?
 - a. Please describe how you access the e-learning program.
 - b. How user-friendly do you consider the program?
8. How do you perceive the relevance of the content and its impact on your motivation to engage with the e-learning program?
 - a. Do you consider most of the trainings offered via your agency's e-learning program relevant to the work you do?
 - b. How does relevance of the content impact your motivation to use the program?
9. How do you understand the impact of your personal sense of well-being on your motivation to engage with the e-learning program?
 - a. Do you notice a difference in how you feel and your motivation to engage with the e-learning activities?

- b. Describe your general sense of well-being while on the job.

Follow Up Questions (2nd interview; member checking):

Following the analysis of the interview data, the researcher will make a follow up phone call to research participants to share any interpretations and analysis and check for accuracy of same. The questions will be developed after the data analysis.

Appendix B: Agency Letter of Cooperation

Dear Ms. Kingery,

Based on my review of your research proposal, I give permission for you to conduct a study entitled E-Learning as a Professional Development Strategy: Understanding the Rural Child Welfare Professional's Lived Experience.

. As part of this study, I authorize you to interview research participants and compile data for the purpose of your dissertation study. Individuals' participation will be voluntary and at their discretion.

We understand that our organization's responsibility is to provide you with contact information for child welfare professionals under our employ. We reserve the right to withdraw from the study at any time if our circumstances change.

I confirm that I am authorized to approve research in this setting.

I understand that the data collected will remain entirely confidential and may not be provided to anyone outside of the research team without permission from the Walden University IRB.

Sincerely,
Authorization Official
Contact Information