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Education Policy Adoption in a Child Welfare Agency: Frontline Perspectives on Leadership

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Abstract

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MA, Troy University, 2014

BS, Clark University, 1999

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

This study focused on a policy that promotes educational stability for foster children in a southern state in the US. At the time of this study, this policy had not been fully adopted across the state which resulted in foster children not routinely receiving the interventions necessary for improving academic outcomes. Using the diffusion of innovation theory as a framework, the purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore how local-level leaders impacted the successful adoption of education policy in one county office of a statewide child welfare agency. Data were collected from a sample of 5 case managers and a review of the literature. The data were coded and analyzed using Colaizzi's 7-step method of data analysis. Results revealed the specific actions that were taken by county-level leaders to impact the successful adoption of the policy. Such actions included the allocation of resources and the intentional inclusion of informal leaders in decision-making around policy implementation. The social change implications stemming from this study include recommendations made to program leadership to consider practical changes to policy implementation that may result in successful adoption of this policy. Such changes may lead to foster children across the state receiving the benefits of the evidence-based supports outlined in the policy and may lead to an improvement in the delivery of services to vulnerable populations served by the child welfare agency.

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to my mother, Anne M. Harreden. She has been the most constant support throughout my life journey. I share this victory with her and thank her for pushing me to exceed the low expectations given by society to a girl from humble beginnings. I love you, mom.

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I would like to acknowledge the faculty of Walden University. Most notably, my thanks go to Dr. Patricia Ripoll and Dr. Sandra Harris. Thank you both for pushing me beyond where I thought I could go. Additional thanks go to my husband, Richard Williams, Jr. The support and patience you've shown cannot be measured and will never be forgotten. This accomplishment simply would not have been possible without you having helped me to balance work, family, and school. Thank you for the late-night study snacks and for creating a quiet space for me to write. I love you, and I share this victory with you.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

A child welfare agency (CWA) in the southern region of the United States established an education stability policy (ESP) to provide evidence-based interventions such as tutoring, educational advocacy, and interagency collaboration designed to improve academic outcomes for children in foster care. Four years post implementation, the ESP has not been fully adopted throughout the state. This lack of full adoption creates a condition that results in foster children not routinely receiving the interventions necessary for improving academic outcomes. This study is important, as the results may provide information that agency leadership can use in the development of practices that improve agency-wide adoption of the ESP. Adoption of the ESP could promote social change by ensuring that the state's foster children consistently receive the evidence-based interventions available through agency-wide compliance with the policy.

In this first chapter, I begin with a discussion of the background of the ESP. In addition, I include a discussion of the literature related to the role of leadership in the adoption of policy, then follow by describing the gap in knowledge that supports the need for this study. The problem statement and purpose of the study are clearly defined and include evidence that the problem is current, relevant, and worthy of exploration. An introduction to the research question is followed by a discussion of the theoretical framework within which the study was conducted, the nature of the study, definitions of key terms, assumptions, delimitations, limitations, and study significance.

Background

Results from several studies have provided evidence of the educational challenges faced by children in foster care (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014a; Cox, 2013; Gustavsson & MacEachron, 2012; Sydow & Flango, 2012; Zetlin & Weinberg, 2013). Ample research also provides discussion and identification of various evidence-based interventions that positively impact the educational wellbeing of this vulnerable population. Such interventions include the appointment of educational advocates (Cox 2013; Morton, 2016; Weinberg, Oshiro, & Shea, 2014); collaboration between child welfare and local education agencies (Chambers & Palmer, 2010; Cox, 2013; Day, Somers, Darden & Yoon, 2014); and tutoring (Cox, 2013; Flynn, Marquis, Paquet, Peeke, & Aubry, 2012; Vinnerljung, Tideman, Sallinas, & Forsman, 2014). Federal mandates such as the Fostering Connections to Success and Promoting Adoptions Act (FCA; 2008) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) require child welfare agencies to monitor the educational wellbeing of children in foster care. Although there is no federal legislation that mandates that child welfare agencies implement specific educational wellbeing policy or departments, this state's CWA has taken an innovative approach to the promotion of educational wellbeing of foster children through the creation of an Education Unit and the ESP, which guides their work.

The Educational Stability Policy was established by CWA executive leadership in 2013. As outlined in the ESP, all children between the ages of 5 and 17 must be referred to the agency's Education Unit upon entry into foster care. This referral is initiated by the local-level case manager, and it is the preliminary step in connecting foster children

to evidence-based interventions offered through the Education Unit. As outlined in the ESP, the purpose of the Education Unit is to assess, plan for, and monitor the educational wellbeing of children in state custody. This is accomplished though the implementation of evidence-based interventions such as educational assessments, tutoring, advocacy, and interagency collaboration. When children are not referred to the Education Unit as directed in the ESP, children do not become connected to the evidence-based interventions provided by professionals in the Education Unit.

The Education Unit is mainly composed of 14 Education Support Monitors (ESMs), who are located throughout the state and assigned to cover one of the 14 geographical regions established by the CWA. These professionals lead a team of certified teachers who contract with the CWA to provide educational assessments and tutoring as needed. Each ESM also works collaboratively with CWA case managers, school social workers, educators, foster parents, and court liaisons to put plans in place to improve academic outcomes for children in care. Per the ESP, once children are referred to the Education Unit by their case manager, they are assessed by a certified teacher to determine their initial academic skill level. Subsequently, individual plans are put into place based on the needs of the child. Plans may include various evidence-based interventions and practices that are supported through the literature as positively impacting academic outcomes for children in care. These interventions are outlined in the ESP and include tutoring, educational advocacy, and collaboration with local education agencies.

How Leaders Impact Policy Adoption

The engagement of leadership is of paramount importance for the successful implementation and adoption of policy in any agency (Aarons et al., 2016; Claiborne, Auerbach, Lawrence, & Schudrich, 2013; Lambert, Richards, & Merrill, 2016). Findings from past research have revealed that including frontline staff in the decision-making process sets the tone for success in policy adoption on the front lines (Aarons et al., 2016; Claiborne et al., 2013). Claiborne et al. (2013) offered that leaders who include frontline employees in the decision-making process through the intentional creation of systems of two-way communication positively impact the successful adoption of policy.

Enz (2012) identified other factors that affect the adoption of policy. Although Enz's study was conducted in the hospitality industry, the findings are relevant as they support the premise that leaders play a significant role in policy adoption at the local level. Enz found that leaders who purposefully incorporate implementation strategies that focus on high levels of employee participation emerge as the most impactful in the organizational adoption of policy. Strategies such as the creation of "task forces, cross-functional teams, focus groups, and employee surveys" (Enz, 2012, p. 189) were identified as positively related to the successful adoption of policy in a service industry.

Schleien and Miller (2010) conducted a study to make recommendations to accelerate local-level adoption of a policy designed to improve compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act. The authors found that leadership support and active advocacy on the front lines were of paramount importance to the successful adoption of the policy (Schleien & Miller, 2010). The researchers also concluded that adoption of

policy at the local level was positively impacted when leaders intentionally incorporated employee participation strategies in policy implementation practices (Schleien & Miller, 2010). Findings from the Schleien and Miller study are of interest to my study, as I explored the impact that local-level leaders had on the successful adoption of the ESP.

Problem Statement

Foster children in the identified state are not being consistently connected to the evidence-based educational interventions available to them through the Education Unit because they are not being referred for such interventions at the local level. As outlined in the ESP, evidence-based interventions designed to improve educational outcomes are available to all of the state's school-aged foster children, provided that they are referred to the Education Unit for evaluation. Despite the ESP mandate that local-level case managers refer *all* eligible children, regional referral rates indicate significant variances in the level at which this mandate has been adopted across the state. This lack of adoption of the ESP at the local level presents a condition that results in foster children not being referred to the Education Unit to receive the evidence-based educational interventions available to them through that unit.

Successful adoption of the ESP is critical as research has revealed that children in foster care experience educational challenges such as multiple school and home placements, low literacy and numeracy rates, grade retention, undiagnosed learning disabilities, high truancy rates, high rates of disciplinary action, and high risk of secondary school dropout (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014a; Cox, 2013; Sydow & Flango, 2012). The literature reveals that evidence-based interventions such as the

assignment of education advocates contribute positively to the educational wellbeing of children in foster care (Jackson & Cameron, 2012; Krinsky & Liebmann, 2011). In fact, Krinsky and Liebmann (2011) regarded the involvement of formal educational advocates as a meaningful way to positively impact the educational outcomes of children in state custody and lauded such advocacy as a best practice in the implementation of FCA. Other evidence-based interventions outlined in the ESP include interagency collaboration (Chambers & Palmer, 2010; Cox, 2013; Day et al., 2014) and provision of tutorial support (Flynn et al., 2012; O'Brien & Rutland, 2008; Osbourne et al., 2010). There is a lack of research that specifically addresses the educational outcomes of the state's foster children who receive the evidence-based interventions outlined in the ESP, so the CWA leadership must rely upon existing research regarding the efficacy of educational interventions.

Based on the significance of the identified educational challenges faced by foster children, exploration of the impact of leaders on the successful adoption of ESP at the local level is critical to improving the educational outcomes of this vulnerable population. In this study, I explored the impact of local-level leaders in a county within one region that has successfully adopted the ESP. The impact of these leaders on that successful adoption was explored from the perspectives of frontline employees. Finally, because there are few studies that examine the impact of local-level leaders on the adoption of education policy in a state child welfare agency (Meloy, Lipscomb, & Baron, 2015), the results of this study make a contribution to that limited body of literature.

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative research was to explore the impact of local leadership on the successful adoption of innovative education policy implemented by a state CWA. Such an exploration is important to agency-wide adoption of ESP, which was created by CWA executive leadership to provide for the educational wellbeing of children in foster care. There have only been a few studies that examined the impact of local-level leaders on the adoption of education policy in a state child welfare agency (Meloy et al., 2015). This study makes a contribution to that limited body of literature.

Research Question

The following question was answered by this research: How do local-level leaders impact the adoption of education policy in a child welfare agency?

Theoretical Framework

Rogers's (1995) diffusion of innovation (DOI) theory provides the theoretical framework for explaining how, why, and at what rate new practices, technologies, or innovations are adopted throughout social systems. This theory suggests that the success of policy adoption depends upon five categories that, when simplified, determine whether or not a new policy will be better than the status quo and worth the effort of implementation (Cairney & Heikkila, 2014). Rogers argued that the five categories are (a) relative advantage of the new idea in relation to the status quo, (b) compatibility with the organizational values and norms, (c) complexity of the new idea with regard to ease of use, (d) whether the new idea can be tried on a limited basis, and (e) the ease with which results of the new idea can be observed.

Rogers (1995) also argued that leaders, both informal and formal, play an important role in the successful adoption of policy. Rogers defined a *formal leader* as a person who is a leader based on position, such as a manager or director. Such a leader is granted authority as a decision maker by virtue of title. Conversely, an *informal leader* is one who, regardless of position or title, has a unique influence over peers. This leader can often be found on the front lines, in the field, or in the lower levels of the organizational chart (Rogers, 1995). Informal leaders are instrumental in the adoption of policy by virtue of the unique influence they have on other frontline workers (Rogers, 1995). Throughout the literature, leaders are frequently referred to as policy or innovation champions (Alharthey, Rasli, Rosman, & Al-Ghazali, 2013; Moreland-Russell & Carothers, 2015; Rogers, 1995; Willging, Green, Gunderson, Chaffin, & Aarons, 2015). In addition to the concept of policy championing, other concepts of how leaders impact policy adoption emerged from the literature review. Details regarding the specifics of how leaders impact policy adoption at the local level are presented in Chapter 2.

The ESP has not been fully adopted at the local level. As of August 31, 2017, the Education Unit's *Quarterly Report* indicated that while some of the regions had breached the 90% threshold, none of the 14 regions under the jurisdiction of the state's CWA had met the ESP-mandated 100% referral rate. Data also suggest that there are significant variances in the rates of adoption of the 14 regions. Using DOI as a framework, I explored the perspectives of employees to determine what innovative strategies local-level leaders employed to achieve a referral rate of 90% or better in one county.

Nature of Study

In this research, I employed a qualitative case study design to explore the strategies that local-level leaders used to impact the adoption of the ESP at the local level. The qualitative methodology was most appropriate for this study because the intent of qualitative research is to "study a specific issue or phenomenon in a certain population" (Leung, 2015, p. 326). The phenomena in this study were the strategies that local-level leaders used to successfully adopt the ESP as measured by consistent referral of eligible children to the Education Unit. The "certain population" (Leung, 2015, p. 326) was composed of local-level employees working in the permanency unit of one county within the region identified as having successfully adopted the ESP. Qualitative methodology also allowed for the development of rich narrative that captured the unique perspectives of participants (Creswell, 2013). The use of a qualitative methodology was appropriate for achieving the purpose of this study, which was to determine the actions taken by local-level leaders to achieve successful adoption of the ESP.

Identification of the county under focus for this case study began with my review of the Education Unit *Quarterly Report*, which highlighted the referral rates of each of the state's 14 regions. Based on that review, I was able to identify the region with the highest referral rate. Once the region was identified, I submitted a written request to the Education Unit data manager to provide me with the referral rates for all counties within the identified region. The county with the highest referral rate was then selected as the case for study. The elements of these data did not include any identifying information and were used solely to identify the region and county in which to conduct the study.

According to the data manager, the Education Unit *Quarterly Report* was published by the Education Unit and was available for public review through written request. While there are certainly other factors that contribute to the full adoption of any policy, for the purpose of this study, compliance with the ESP mandate to refer all school-age children to the Education Unit served as the sole measure of county-level compliance.

Data collection included semistructured interviews with frontline staff currently employed as case managers in the permanency units of the identified county. It was important that participants meet the criterion of being a case manager as they were the staff responsible for submission of the Education Unit referral as outlined in the ESP. Using a semistructured interview, which is common practice in qualitative research, allowed me the flexibility to deviate from the stated interview protocol when the situation dictated that I do so (O'Sullivan, Rassel, & Berner, 2008). This flexibility allowed room for me to explore perceptions, themes, and concepts at a deeper, more meaningful level than the use of a quantitative methodology would have. In addition to interviews, I attempted to collect data through review of meeting minutes, flyers related to the ESP, and ESP-related training material. Unfortunately, despite an initial pledge of cooperation, the agency later restricted my access to any such documents and requested that the name of the CWA be kept confidential.

Definitions

Educational advocates: Individuals responsible for ensuring that the educational rights of children are protected and that students receive appropriate educational support (Hahnel & VanZile, 2012).

Educational wellbeing: Achieved by maintaining consistency with regard to school placement and provision of academic supports to ensure that an at-risk child is able to meet academic benchmarks and remain in his or her school of origin despite changes in residency (Rouse & Fantuzzo, 2009).

Evidenced-based interventions: Include those practices or interventions identified through rigorous research as having significantly positive outcomes (Aarons et al., 2016).

Formal leaders: Those individuals in formal leadership positions such as supervisors, managers, and directors who have the authority and responsibility to lead employees in the implementation of policy (Rogers, 1995; Ross, 2014).

Foster child/youth: A child under the age of 18 who is removed from his or her home by the court due to substantiated issues of abuse, neglect, or the parents' inability to provide care. Children and youth in foster care may be placed with relatives, with foster families, or in group homes (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014b).

Frontline employees/staff: Individuals who are responsible for serving as primary contacts for foster children or parents (Russell, 2017).

Informal leaders: Those individuals found throughout the organization that hold no particular authority or official leadership title, but who have a unique influence on organizational behavior. The informal leader can be found at all organizational levels and is often seen as the problem solver by other employees (Rogers, 1995; Ross, 2014).

Organizational climate: Refers to the employee understanding of organizational values as evident by practices, policies, and procedures (Aarons et al., 2014).

Permanency unit: Unit within a state child welfare agency that is responsible for the provision of services that move a child from foster care to permanent home placements (Barto et al., n.d.).

Policy adoption: The decision to accept a policy or innovation as the best method to achieve intended results and the subsequent endorsement of that policy or innovation (Rogers, 1995).

Policy or innovation champions: Individuals who promote and solicit support for policy adoption through action and dialogue with others throughout the organization (Moreland-Russell & Carothers, 2015; Rogers, 1995; Willging et al., 2015).

Assumptions

A major assumption of this research was that leaders have an impact on the adoption of policy. This assumption was supported by a review of the literature, which provided empirical evidence of several leadership factors that advance or hinder policy adoption. Those factors are thoroughly discussed in Chapter 2. An additional assumption was that the evidence-based interventions outlined in the ESP do in fact have a positive impact on the educational outcomes of foster children. Because there has been no research specific to the outcomes of the state's foster children who are connected to the resources available through the Education Unit, it was assumed that the conclusions drawn from other studies regarding the efficacy of the evidence-based interventions outlined in the ESP were accurate. This assumption was supported by the literature, which identified the specific evidence-based interventions introduced and discussed previously in this chapter.

For the purposes of this study, it was assumed that the quantitative data published or provided by the Education Unit relative to the regional and county rates of referral submission were accurate and therefore served as the basis for identifying the case to be studied. The regional data are published quarterly and serve as documentation of the rate of ESP compliance as determined by the ratio of total referrals submitted to the total number of foster children in the legal custody of each region. Based on these data, I identified the region with the highest referral rate. The referral rates for each county within the identified region were then obtained by written request to the Education Unit data manager, and the county with the highest referral rate became the case under study. This study was initiated with the assumption that the state's CWA would allow me to conduct the research. Under the guidance of an agency-identified sponsor who served as a liaison between myself and agency leadership, I was able to recruit five local-level employees who volunteered to participate. It was assumed that all participants provided honest answers regarding meeting the established criteria as well as answers to the actual interview questions.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of the study was limited to frontline employees assigned to permanency units in one county of the state's CWA that had successfully adopted the ESP, as measured solely by referral percentages. The decision to identify the case solely by that with the highest referral percentage was a delimitation of the study, in that referral percentages are only one measure of successful ESP adoption. Including other measures

of successful policy adoption, such as the efficacy of the evidence-based interventions outlined in the ESP, was beyond the scope of the study.

My interest in the perceptions of frontline employees was an additional delimitation that called for the exclusion of participants who did not meet the criteria of being currently employed as a case manager in the permanency unit of the county identified as having the highest referral rate. The criteria for participants enabled the recruitment of individuals who had firsthand knowledge of what was involved in the implementation and successful adoption of the ESP. The criteria for participants were narrowed to case managers, as these individuals were responsible for initiating referrals per the ESP.

The selection of a qualitative methodology presented a third delimitation of the study. The qualitative methodology is most appropriate when the purpose of a study is to explore perceptions of a population in order to develop a comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). My interest in the study was in exploring the perceptions of frontline staff to understand how local-level leaders may have impacted the successful adoption of the ESP. Had the purpose of the study been to measure the success of the ESP, then a quantitative methodology that used pre and post testing or analysis of data relative to academic gains of children in foster care might have been more appropriate. Finally, the research method and design presented delimitations in that the results of this study are not likely to be transferrable to other populations outside of those directly associated with the study. The specificity of the sample to include employment with the state CWA, assignment to a specific county-level permanency unit,

position, and geographical location presented a boundary of the study that limited

transferability to other populations (Leung, 2015). The study does, however, have the

potential for replication in other counties within the state's CWA.

Limitations

As with any research, there were anticipated challenges for which a plan was

required. This research had the potential for two design challenges. The most significant

challenge of the design was the threat of researcher bias. Chenail (2011) heralded the

management of researcher bias as an unavoidable challenge inherent in qualitative

research. Marshall and Rossman (2015) warned of the importance of researcher

acknowledgment of personal biases and urged qualitative researchers to openly document

their biases in the narrative so as to make clear any distinctions between the interpretation

of the data and the researcher's own perspectives. As the research instrument, I was

aware that I carried with me my own personal bias. Specifically, my understanding of the

unique educational challenges faced by children in foster care lent a sense of urgency

with regard to the full adoption of the ESP across the state. Draper and Swift (2011)

cautioned that awareness of one's bias is important in the avoidance of researcher bias.

Their opinion resonated well with me, as I am passionate about the education of foster

children and was eager to explore the reasons for a lack of statewide adoption of policy

designed to improve the educational outcomes of this vulnerable population.

Throughout my research, it was important for me to acknowledge and remain

cognizant of my bias so as to avoid allowing it to impact my conclusions. To decrease the

possibility of researcher bias, I took steps to ensure that I had no personal connection to

any of the participants. To that end, I did not include participants from the CWA office in which I was working at the beginning of my research. In addition, as recommended by Draper and Swift (2011), I maintained a log of any personal feelings or ideas I experienced while conducting interviews. When interpreting the data, I often compared my personal log to the interview responses provided by participants. Doing so allowed me to ascertain whether or not my personal feelings and ideas had any influence on the findings (Draper & Swift, 2011). This visual juxtaposition of my ideas and those expressed by participants was helpful and, as suggested by Chenail (2011), allowed me to easily identify any assumptions that I may have inadvertently made during the interview process as highlighted by contrasting participant viewpoints.

Significance

This study is significant in that it makes an original contribution to the research on policy adoption by determining how local-level leaders of a state child welfare agency in one county impacted the successful adoption of an innovative education policy. The ESP is innovative because historically, child welfare agencies focused primarily on the safety and permanency of children in foster care (Cox, 2013; Pecora, 2012). With the recent passing of legislation requiring child welfare agencies and departments of education to work collaboratively to improve the educational outcomes of children in foster care (ESSA, 2015), the ESP marks an innovative way of ensuring that foster children receive needed services. The findings from this study are now available for use in the state's CWA to make practical changes in regions that have not had success with the adoption of this innovative policy. Such practical change may have positive social change

implications, as full adoption of the ESP will result in the state's foster children gaining access to evidence-based educational interventions that may improve educational outcomes for this vulnerable population.

Summary

Chapter 1 provided an introduction to my study. In this chapter, I initiated discussion on the problem of foster children going without evidence-based educational interventions due to a lack of agency-wide adoption of the ESP as evident by the inconsistent regional referral rates identified in the Education Unit *Quarterly Report*. Also included is an overview of DOI, including background information that framed the study. The overview of DOI was followed by the purpose of the study; an introduction to the qualitative methodology, including the research question that guided the research; definitions of terms that were used throughout the study; delimitations, assumptions, and limitations of the study; and a discussion of the significance of the study.

In Chapter 2, I provide a comprehensive review of the literature that includes my search strategies, an in-depth discussion of the theoretical framework, discussion of the four key themes discovered through the literature review, and a summary of my conclusions. The review of literature provides the reader with an in-depth understanding of prior research involving the role of leaders in the implementation and adoption of policy in a public agency. Chapter 3 focuses on a comprehensive discussion of the research methodology, including the research design and rationale, my understanding of my role as the researcher, data collection and analysis procedures, measures taken to ensure research validity, and a summary of the first three chapters. In Chapter 4 I present

the findings which are preceded by the challenges and resulting revisions, a discussion of

the pilot study, and a description of the setting and demographics. Chapter 4 also

includes a discussion of the data collection and analysis procedures and ends with a

discussion of issues of trustworthiness. In Chapter 5 I present my interpretations of the

findings relevant to the literature and to the theoretical framework. This final chapter

also includes a discussion of the limitations, recommendations for further research,

implications for social change, and my final conclusion.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

In July 2013, the state's CWA created and implemented an innovative policy to support the educational wellbeing of children in state custody. The ESP included a mandate that all school-age children be referred to the CWA Education Unit for connection to educational assessments, tutoring, advocacy, and interagency collaboration. As of August 2017, none of the state's 14 regions had met the 100% referral mandate, which indicated that the ESP had not yet been fully adopted. The failure to achieve full adoption of the ESP is problematic when one considers that foster children face significant academic challenges, such as low rates of numeracy and literacy, high incidence of grade retention, undiagnosed learning disabilities, multiple home and school transfers, high rates of absenteeism, high frequency of disciplinary actions, and significant risk of high school dropout (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014a; Cox, 2013; Zetlin & Weinberg, 2013). In this study, I explored how local agency leaders in one county influenced the successful adoption of the ESP by reaching a referral rate of 90% or better.

In this second chapter, I discuss the current literature that establishes the relevance of the stated problem. Beginning with the literature search strategy, I explain the iterative process by which I was able to exhaust the literature on the topic of the impact of leadership on successful policy adoption in a child welfare agency. I also discuss the DOI theoretical framework, providing an understanding of how this theory has been used in prior similar research as well as a rationale for use in the study.

Literature Search Strategy

In searching for literature relevant to the topic of policy adoption in child welfare agencies, I used several databases, including ERIC, SAGE Premiere, Google Scholar, SocIndex, EBSCO Open Access Journals, SAGE Research Methods Core, ScienceDirect, and Thoreau. I included databases from diverse disciplines such as education, social services, and public administration, to ensure that my search was exhaustive and to determine that my research would in fact make a significant contribution to the literature. While I found extensive literature on policy implementation and adoption in various disciplines, literature that focused on local-level policy adoption in a child welfare agency was scant. In addition, literature that focused specifically on local-level adoption of innovative educational policy within a child welfare agency was virtually nonexistent. Accounting for the lack of specific literature resulted in the expansion of my search to include the role of leadership in policy adoption in disciplines other than child welfare. Such disciplines included education, hospitality, and healthcare.

In an attempt to exhaust the literature, an iterative approach was taken with regard to key search terms and phrases. The search began with terms linked with the purpose of the study. Such terms included *policy implementation and adoption*; *policy implementation*; *policy adoption*; *leadership, leader role*; *administrator*; *child welfare and education*; *foster care and education*; and *child welfare and LEA collaboration*. The search expanded to include key terms and phrases related to DOI, such as *diffusion of innovation*; *policy diffusion*; *policy sustainability*; *change agent*; *opinion leader*;

innovation champion; *organizational climate*; *organizational culture*; *evidence-based intervention*; and *evidence-based practice*.

Theoretical Framework

Rogers (1995) presented DOI as a framework for exploring and explaining how new policy, practices, and products are adopted throughout social systems. This theory has been tested in many disciplines, each providing evidence that suggests that the adoption of innovative policy at the local level is generally dependent upon whether or not the new policy is better than the status quo and worth the effort of implementation (Rogers, 1995). Rogers's (1995) DOI theory also holds that the role of leaders, whether formal or informal, is a determining factor in the successful adoption of policy, practice, or innovation.

There are four elements within DOI: innovation, communication channels, time, and social systems. The focus of this study was most closely aligned with the elements of innovation, communication channels, and social systems, as the purpose was to explore the role of local-level leaders in the successful adoption of innovative policy in a child welfare agency. The element of time was not a focus of this study, as the sample was one that had already achieved relative success in the adoption of the innovative policy, as evident in the 90% or better compliance rate.

Rogers (1995) defined *innovation* as "an idea, practice, or object that is perceived as new by an individual or other unit of adoption" (p. 11). He argued that there are five "characteristics of innovations" (Rogers, 1995, p. 15) that impact the rates at which potential adopters adopt an innovation. Those characteristics are relative advantage of

the innovation, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability (Rogers, 1995).

When considering the relative advantage of an innovation, potential adopters contemplate

the advantages of the innovation in relation to how it will impact their daily lives or work

(Rogers, 1995). Compatibility with existing values and norms of a unit or organization is

another consideration. If the innovation is incompatible with existing norms, then it is

more difficult to adopt and may require a difficult shift in organizational norms or values

(Rogers, 1995). Complexity of an innovation impacts the rate at which the innovation is

adopted throughout an organization as those responsible for implementation need to have

a clear understanding of how the innovation works. Rogers cautioned that innovations

that are "simple to understand are adopted more rapidly than innovations that require the

adopter to develop new skills and understandings" (p. 16). Trialability is the extent to

which innovations can be introduced on a trial basis providing the potential adopter an

opportunity to test the innovation before fully adopting. Rogers suggested that

innovations that are introduced in stages have a better chance of adoption than those that

are introduced at one point in time. Allowing potential adopters to test an innovation in

stages provides the opportunity to increase understanding and develop new skills while

considering the adoption of the innovation (Rogers, 1995). Finally, the characteristic of

observability is critical to the adoption of innovative policy, as it provides an opportunity

for potential adopters to witness the benefits or results of the innovation prior to full

adoption. When results are observable, whether positive or negative, word of those

observations spreads throughout social systems (Rogers, 1995).

Rogers (1995) described the second element of DOI, communication channels, as "the means by which messages get from one individual to another" (p. 18). While there are a plethora of communication channels, Rogers suggested that "interpersonal channels" (p. 18) are most effective in the successful adoption of innovation. In-person communication between two or more individuals positively impacts the rate at which innovation is adopted when the individuals share common values, characteristics, or culture (Rogers, 1995).

As stated previously, the study did not focus on the element of time with regard to the rate at which the innovative policy is adopted. Rogers (1995) acknowledged that the element of time is often disregarded in qualitative studies, yet the other elements of DOI remain relevant in behavioral research. The final element of DOI is critical to behavioral research within the framework of DOI. The diffusion of innovations takes place within social systems. Rogers (1995) described a *social system* as "a set of interrelated units that are engaged in joint problem-solving to accomplish a common goal" (p. 23). Social systems can vary in size so long as the units within the system are bound by a common goal. The structures of social systems are often characterized by shared norms, established culture, and the influence of formal and informal leaders (Rogers, 1995).

According to Rogers (1995), the majority of research on DOI began as exploration of innovation adopted at the individual level and eventually extended to individuals within organizations, such as school principals and hospital CEOs. Rogers stated that the expansion resulted in a surge of "organizational innovativeness" (p. 377) studies that compared the innovation adoption rates of two or more organizations by

collecting data from one individual in each organization. A major problem with that expansion was the false premise that the individual principal or CEO was representative of the entire organization (Rogers, 1995). That false premise led researchers to begin to explore the leader as an individual as opposed to being representative of the entire organization. In the late 1970s, however, research took yet another turn and began to focus on the leaders' role in the success of adoption *within* an organization (Rogers, 1995). Based on this shift in focus, Rogers (1995) proposed that there are five stages to the innovation process *within* an organization and that those five stages are divided into two subprocesses: initiation and implementation.

Initiation of Subprocess

The initiation subprocess begins after an organization has identified a problem that needs a solution. During the initiation subprocess, the organization begins the process of data collection, analysis, and planning that leads up to the decision to adopt an innovative solution (Rogers, 1995). Agenda setting and matching are the two stages that make up the initiation subprocess (Rogers, 1995). Leaders play an important role in the agenda setting and matching stages as they hold responsibility for the prioritization of organizational problems for solution (Rogers, 1995). The agenda-setting stage is characterized by the initial gathering of information relative to the problem faced by the organization. The initiation stage often occurs over an extended time period. This stage is characterized by identification and prioritization of organizational problems and a review of organizational resources that may contribute to solutions to those problems (Rogers, 1995).

According to Rogers (1995), the matching stage occurs when a policy or innovation has been identified as a possible solution to the organizational problem. Once identified, the innovation and problem are tentatively matched to determine the feasibility of the innovation from a practical perspective. Rogers (1995) further contended that in this stage, leaders consider the feasibility of the innovation by considering challenges that it may produce and then making decisions to either reject or implement the innovation.

Implementation of Subprocess

Rogers (1995) described the implementation subprocess as "all of the events, actions, and decisions involved in putting an innovation to use" (p. 392). The stages of the implementation subprocess include redefining/restructuring, clarifying, and routinizing (Rogers, 1995). The redefining/restructuring subprocess is characterized by the leaders' response to the innovation in terms of allocating resources to accommodate and implement the innovation. Organizations frequently assign specialized units of individuals to lead the implementation of the innovation (Rogers, 1995). Such individuals are often referred to as innovation champions and can be found at all levels of the organization without consideration of title or position (Armstrong et al., 2014; Rogers, 1995; Salveron et al., 2015). These formal or informal leaders endorse, promote, and solicit support for the innovation through action and dialogue with others at all organizational levels (Rogers, 1995; Willging et al., 2015). As these champions begin to influence others in the organization, the clarifying stage begins.

During the clarifying stage, innovation champions espouse the merits of the innovation throughout the organization while individuals on the front lines probe to

determine for themselves whether or not the proposed innovation is better than the status quo (Rogers, 1995). It is also during this stage, when the innovation is still new, that skepticism is natural as individuals seek to understand or even refute the innovation (Rogers, 1995). Rogers (1995) emphasized the significance of formal and informal leaders playing critical roles during the clarifying stage by acting as innovation champions. These individuals, particularly those who are leaders at the local level, have the ability to influence local-level employees through conversations about the innovation and what is to come from its implementation (Rogers, 1995). Through this communication, leaders promote a clearer understanding for employees regarding the goals of the innovation and the employees' roles in achieving those goals. In addition to communication regarding the innovation, these leaders model adoption of the innovation for those frontline employees who are responsible for its implementation.

After the innovation has been implemented throughout the organization, processes associated with the innovation become routine. Rogers (1995) referred to this phase as the routinization stage. During this stage, the innovation "becomes incorporated into the regular activities of the organization, and the innovation loses its separate identity" (p. 399) as it is accepted by frontline employees as the new status quo. The routinization stage represents the final stage in the implementation process and is marked by the organization's successful adoption of the innovation.

Rogers (1995) stressed the importance of leaders, formal and informal, serving as innovation champions in all stages of policy adoption. Organizations are more likely to achieve successful implementation of innovations, such as innovative policy adoption,

when leaders engage in high levels of interaction across all organizational levels (Rogers, 1995). The lack of adoption of innovative policy by employees at the local level is a challenge that can hinder the achievement of goals set out in any policy (Enz, 2012; Schleien & Miller, 2010). Rogers (1995) emphasized that leader engagement in terms of communication and modeling at the local level is of paramount importance for the successful adoption of policy (Rogers, 1995). In this study, I explored the impact of local leadership on the successful adoption of an innovative education policy within the state's CWA. With Rogers's (1995) DOI as a framework, I considered the perspectives of local-level employees, and based on the data collected from interviews, I provided my interpretation of the implementation stage of the county studied.

Rogers's (1995) DOI has been the framework for several studies of leaders and policy adoption. Salveron et al. (2015) used the DOI as a framework to conduct a 6 year case study of the implementation of an innovative program in a large child welfare agency in Australia. Using semistructured interviews, the authors collected data from 27 child welfare staff and practitioners who were responsible for the implementation of the innovative program. Leadership, both formal and informal, was found to have a significant impact on the successful adoption of the innovative program (Salveron et al., 2015). Specifically, Salveron et al. (2015) cited the leader's use of strategies such as the creation of clear communication channels, continuous improvement efforts, and the creation of multi-level feedback loops as effective in the adoption of innovation. The authors cited the importance of using a theoretical framework such as DOI when guiding the implementation of initiatives in child welfare agencies.

Chatfield and Reddick (2018) sought to explore how "policy innovations diffuse across different levels of government" (p. 1). Using DOI as a framework, the authors conducted a qualitative case study of eight Australian government agencies at the federal and state levels. Australia was selected based on its overall "clearly successful" (Chatfield & Reddick, 2018, p. 4) adoption of an innovative policy despite the fact that the eight cases had varying degrees of success. The authors conducted an analysis of historical events to identify best practices that led to the successful adoption of innovative policy in each of the eight cases. In their findings, the authors cited best practices such as the utilization of early adopters or "policy entrepreneurs" (p. 11). Unlike Rogers (1995), who described policy champions as *individuals* who influenced the adoption of policy through modeling and coaching, Chatfield and Reddick described policy entrepreneurs as whole departments or agencies that took the lead in the diffusion of innovative policy. Chatfield and Reddick suggested that the identification and utilization of policy entrepreneurs had a positive impact on the successful adoption of innovative policy. Also noteworthy is the authors' conclusion that DOI is useful in the exploration of policy innovation in government agencies (Chatfield & Reddick, 2018). As such, the authors called for additional research in this area as government agencies have traditionally been burdened by bureaucracy that affects their ability to effectively adopt innovative policy (Chatfield & Reddick, 2018).

Diffusion of innovation theory was also used as the framework in a study conducted by Graham, Woodfield, and Harrison (2013). Using a case study method, the authors sought to explore the stages of innovative policy implementation and adoption at

six higher education institutions. Graham et al. conducted interviews with administrators

as the primary instrument for data collection and found that despite faculty level support

of the innovative policy at all six universities, there were significant variances in the

stages of policy adoption. The authors concluded that the variance in stages of the

diffusion process identified by Rogers (1995) as agenda-setting to routinization, were the

result of "barriers related to institutional policies, structures, and lack of support"

(Graham et al., 2013, p.11). Based on those findings, Graham et al. called for further

research to explore what administrators might *do* to impact the successful adoption of

innovative policy.

DOI and Education Stability Policy

Federal legislation such as the FCA (2008) and more recently, the ESSA (2015),

provided states with the framework for implementing policies and procedures that

address the educational wellbeing of children and youth in foster care. States have been

innovative in developing such policies and procedures by implementing evidence-based

interventions that improve the educational outcomes of this vulnerable population. The

assignment of educational advocates (Cox, 2013; Weinberg et al., 2014) is one such

intervention and was identified by Krinsky and Leibman (2011) as a best practice in

improving the educational outcomes of foster children. Gustavsson and MacEachron

(2012) stressed the importance of establishing formal partnerships with local education

agencies to ensure that foster children are allowed to remain in their school of origin in

the event that they are placed in a foster home out of their school zone. In support of

such partnerships, Stanley (2012) and Tyre (2012) suggested the development of

interagency education teams that could act as safety nets for foster children through increased interagency collaboration and communication. Mentoring programs designed to encourage postsecondary enrollment were also highlighted as impactful in the educational wellbeing of children in care (Bruster & Coccoma, 2013). Leaders of the state's CWA developed the ESP which incorporates various evidence-based interventions as an innovative approach to improving the educational wellbeing of the state's foster children.

According to the program manager, in response to federal legislation, CWA leadership implemented a pilot program in April of 2010, which was designed to provide individualized tutoring to foster children who were identified as struggling academically. This temporary pilot served only a fraction of the foster children across the state but according to the program manager, in July of 2013 the pilot program became a permanent unit of this state's CWA and a formal policy was created to guide the work. The program manager reported that the formalization of the Education Unit required the recruitment of a team of highly specialized individuals with backgrounds in both education and social work. The creation of this specialized unit, responsible for carrying out innovative policy, is characteristic of the redefining/restructuring stage of Rogers's (1995) initiation subprocess model previously described.

The primary goal of the Education Unit is to provide for the educational wellbeing of foster children as outlined in the ESP which specifies the responsibilities, processes, evidence-based interventions, and goals of the Education Unit. The ESP called for the expansion of the pilot by focusing on *all* school age children in foster care

as opposed to just those who were struggling academically. Per the policy, each child referred to the Education Unit is entitled to any or all of the following evidence-based interventions: academic assessment, educational advocacy, collaboration with local education agencies, and individualized tutoring. Also included in the policy is the requirement that *all* school-age children be referred to the Education Unit within 72 hours of coming into care, regardless of their current academic performance. This shift in focus required a shift in organizational processes as case managers would now be responsible for initiating referrals for *every* school-age child currently in state custody as well as each school-age child entering into foster care.

The evidence-based interventions outlined in the ESP such as tutoring, educational advocacy, and interagency collaboration, have been found to improve the educational outcomes of children in care. Results from various studies have provided empirical evidence that foster children receiving one on one tutoring showed gains in both reading and math levels as noted by the outcomes of pre and post assessments (Flynn et al., 2012; O'Brien & Rutland, 2008; Vinnerljung et al., 2014). Hahnel and Van Zile (2012) concluded that foster children with trained educational advocates were less likely to suffer from undiagnosed learning disabilities because educational advocates ensured that their educational rights were protected and that they were receiving appropriate educational support. Finally, Morton (2016) conducted a qualitative study with current and former foster youth in the state of Oregon. Using interviews designed to explore the lived experiences of this population, Morton concluded from the data that

there was a causal relationship between interagency collaboration and the promotion and graduation rates of foster children.

The ESP mandates that case managers are to complete and submit an Education Unit referral for every child in foster care who is between the ages of 5-17. Despite that mandate, 4 years after ESP introduction, ESP has not been fully adopted across the state. Evidence of this lack of adoption can be found in the variances amongst regions with regards to the submission of Education Unit referrals. I propose that those variances indicate that each of the 14 regions are in one of the three stages of the DOI implementation subprocess described by Rogers (1995) as: redefining/restructuring, clarifying, and routinizing. In this study, I explored a county within the region with the highest compliance rate to explore three elements within the DOI framework:

1. Did leaders have an impact on the successful adoption of the ESP?

2. Did actions taken by leaders align with the premises of DOI?

3. Which stage of the implementation subprocess best describes the current state of ESP adoption in the county under study?

Literature Review Key Concepts

During the review of the literature, the following concepts were frequently identified as factors that are related to the leader's role or impact on policy adoption: formal leaders as champions, intentional inclusion of informal leaders as champions, leaders as resource allocators, and leaders and organizational climate. These concepts are discussed in detail in the sections following.

Formal Leaders as Policy Champions

According to Kaye et al. (2012), formal leaders play an important role in the successful adoption of policy in a child welfare agency. The authors argued that championing the policy through the creation of a vision, allocating resources, and providing ongoing coaching and training to frontline staff were paramount to the successful adoption of policy. Specifically, the authors found that leaders who first received training to "build capacity in listening, engaging, establishing goals, and ensuring accountability" (Kaye et al., 2012, p. 520) were better able to coach and provide ongoing training to frontline staff, which resulted in the successful adoption of innovative policy. This investment in the training of executive leaders is paramount to ensuring that they have the tools necessary to become policy champions (Kaye et al., 2012; Lambert et al., 2016). The authors further called for additional studies of leadership actions that positively contribute to the successful adoption of policy specifically in child welfare agencies (Kaye et al., 2012).

Aarons et al. (2016) echoed the role of formal leaders as being visionaries, resource allocators, and ongoing champions in the sustainment of evidence-based interventions in child welfare agencies. Using a mixed-methods design, the authors explored the role of leadership in the full adoption of policy across multiple child welfare agencies spanning 87 counties and two states. Their findings indicated that strong leadership *at all levels* was important in the full adoption of policy (Aarons et al., 2016). The authors called for additional research to explore what executive leaders might

actually do to increase the leadership skills of those on the front lines, whom the authors

supposed had a direct influence on policy adoption (Aarons et al., 2016).

Willging et al. (2015) conducted a mixed-methods study that explored the leaders'

role in the implementation and adoption of evidence-based interventions in child welfare

agencies located in two different states. The authors concluded that agency leadership

must champion the policy by remaining consistent and staying visibly connected to the

policy from implementation to full adoption. Alvarez (2016) found that poor or

inconsistent communication from formal leaders was a significant deterrent to the

successful implementation of policy. Both studies concluded that leadership turnover and

lack of consistent communication send the message that policy is unimportant and

therefore not a priority for implementation (Alvarez, 2016; Willging et al., 2015). This

issue was considered significant and was subsequently explored via interviews with

frontline staff.

The importance of commitment of leaders as policy champions was underscored

in a recent study conducted by Akin et al. (2016). The authors conducted a qualitative

study to determine the factors that contributed to the successful adoption of policy

designed to support substance-affected families involved in a state child welfare system.

Through data collected from semistructured interviews with state and local child welfare

employees, court personnel, and community leaders, the authors found that the level of

consistent championing by formal leaders at the local level significantly impacted

adoption of policy in a child welfare agency. The authors indicated that coaching from

leaders was an effective strategy for facilitating the frontline staff's effective adoption of

policy. Specifically, the authors noted the importance of taking a strengths-focused approach to building the confidence of frontline staff in adopting the policy (Akin et al., 2016). Such an approach included leaders championing the policy by modeling expectations, assisting frontline staff with practical problem solving in the application of the policy, and holding staff accountable for meeting expectations set out in the policy (Akin, et al., 2016). Like others previously noted, Akin et al. specifically called for additional research on the leader's role in policy implementation and adoption in child welfare agencies.

In a qualitative study of child welfare agencies in three states, Lambert et al. (2016) also identified executive leadership commitment and championing as important to the full adoption of policy. The authors emphasized, however, that coaching, support, and commitment from leaders *at the local level* was critical in adoption and sustainment of policy. The authors suggested that local-level leaders served as policy champions through modeling and actively promoting the policy. These actions had a positive impact on the level of buy-in from employees on the front lines (Lambert et al., 2016). Leaders as policy champions also established problem solving workgroups, training requirements, processes, and accountability measures for those responsible for implementing the policy. According to Lambert et al., leaders who implemented the aforementioned measures sent a clear message that the policy was important and not just a temporary interruption of the status quo.

Enz (2012) conducted a quantitative study and found that formal leader championing of new policy was *less* impactful in the adoption of policy than was the

exercising of power associated with formal leadership. After analysis of data from a questionnaire administered to 53 general managers of a global hotel chain, Enz concluded that the use of inherent power associated with formal leadership was more effective in system-wide policy adoption than was policy championing by the formal leader. The author found that tools inherent in formal leadership such as the creation of a reward system, consistent and frequent formal communication, and meeting one on one with employees were also effective measures taken by leaders to positively impact the adoption of policy (Enz, 2012). Overall, however, it was the use of power to obtain compliance that was most frequently described by participants as effective in the adoption of innovative policy. It is interesting to note that the sample in this study *excluded* local-level leaders or employees, and that the findings are based solely on the perceptions of formal executive leaders (Enz, 2012).

Intentional Inclusion of Informal Leaders as Policy Champions

Data from several studies have shown that leaders can impact the full adoption of policy at the local level by intentionally including informal leaders from the front lines in activities designed to introduce the policy to their peers (Rogers, 1995; Schleien & Miller, 2010). Schleien and Miller (2010) found that leaders positively impacted the adoption of policy designed to promote diversity and inclusion in a community recreation organization by purposefully including informal leaders in activities that highlighted anticipated advantages of the policy. The authors argued that the intentional inclusion of frontline advocates in the introduction of new policy is important to the full adoption of

policy because of the influence that those informal leaders have on those responsible for the day to day, practical implementation of the policy (Schleien & Miller, 2010).

From frequent changes in executive leadership to frontline burnout, the issue of turnover is one that leaders must address and plan for when implementing innovative policy (Armstrong et al., 2014; Lambert et al., 2016; Willging et al., 2015). One strategy highlighted by Armstrong et al. (2014) and Lambert et al. (2016) was the identification and intentional inclusion of informal leaders at all organizational levels. Leaders who implemented this strategy were able to positively impact the adoption of policy despite staff turnover (Armstrong et al., 2014; Lambert et al., 2016). At the local level, leaderships' strategic development of policy experts decreased the impact of staff turnover as leaders identified and prepared frontline staff to serve as peer trainers to ensure that policy expectations were consistently communicated to incoming staff (Willging et al., 2015).

Holt and Ryan (2012) conducted a study of the impact of informal leaders on the adoption of a work-life balance policy in a public organization. The authors recruited ten informal leaders to participate in a one day training that prepared participants to serve as policy champions amongst their peers. The training was facilitated by agency leadership who focused on the benefits of the work-life balance policy and encouraged participants to authentically advocate for the adoption of the new policy amongst their frontline peers. During the training leaders encouraged two-way communication that allowed informal leaders to ask questions so as to increase their understanding and support of the new policy. Agency leaders created opportunities for informal leaders to provide feedback on

anticipated implementation challenges that frontline employees might have and then included informal leaders in the creation of strategies to overcome those challenges. Upon completion of the training, the informal leaders were well-versed on the benefits of the new policy and were prepared to champion the policy amongst their peers (Holt & Ryan, 2012). The authors found that the previous limited adoption of the policy was significantly increased by the intentional inclusion and training of informal leaders as policy champions. The informal and authentic approach of the newly trained policy champions combined with their influence with their peers proved beneficial in the adoption of policy at the local level (Holt & Ryan, 2012). Policy champion authenticity, the authors noted, was paramount to the success of the adoption of policy as frontline employees must feel that the informal leader is a true advocate of the policy and not simply being manipulated by management (Holt & Ryan, 2012).

In another study, Willging et al. (2015) examined the impact that the intentional development of informal leaders would have on adoption of a policy that introduced evidence-based practices in a child welfare agency. The researchers used semistructured interviews with a sample of individuals identified as influential amongst their peers. Results showed that sites with influential individuals at all organizational levels, regardless of title or position, were more likely to successfully implement and adopt the new policy than those sites with frequent changes in leadership or sites with leadership that was centralized at the upper echelon (Willging et al., 2015). The authors argued that successful policy adoption was impacted by formal leaders who intentionally created opportunities for informal leaders to champion the policy (Willging et al., 2015). These

formal leaders, they argued, remained connected to the policy despite competing mandates and took care to train informal leaders at all levels to assume the responsibilities of policy adoption in anticipation of changes in leadership (Willging et al., 2015). Remaining connected to the policy required the intentional inclusion of informal leaders in proactive planning throughout the implementation process. Some strategies included the identification and implementation of support plans for frontline staff who felt overwhelmed with caseloads and the planning for short and long term training programs. Formal leaders' intentional inclusion of informal leaders was paramount to the success of the policy adoption (Willging et al., 2015).

Leaders and Organizational Climate

The implementation of innovative policy, evidence-based or not, is a challenge when the organizational climate is one in which workers already feel overburdened and overworked (Akin, 2016). Previous researchers have suggested that leaders are responsible for organizational climate and that failure to establish a climate where frontline workers are open to change presents a challenge to policy adoption (Aarons et al., 2014; Aarons & Sommerfeld, 2014). According to Aarons et al. (2014), the term organizational climate refers to the employee shared understanding of organizational values as evident by practices, policies, and procedures. Akin et al. (2016) found that leaders played a vital role in creating a climate conducive to successful policy adoption and sustainability in a child welfare agency. The authors encouraged leaders to lay the foundation for frontline staff commitment to the implementation and adoption of innovative policy despite their already heavy caseload, through the creation of an

environment of substantial two-way communication, shared decision-making, extensive training, and ongoing coaching (Akin et al., 2016). Leadership actions such as taking an active role in the provision of ongoing training, actively supporting frontline staff, and allocation of adequate resources to properly implement policy were also cited by Akin et al. as important to the establishment of a climate conducive to policy adoption.

Aarons et al. (2014) stressed the importance of the leaders' role in developing a positive "implementation climate" (p. 257) prior to the introduction of a new policy or practice. More nuanced than the definition of organizational climate, the implementation climate is described as one in which employees have a common perception of the importance and benefit of innovation implementation and have developed that perception through a practical understanding of organizational policy and practice (Aarons et al., 2014; Klein, Conn, Smith, & Sorra, 2001). Such a climate is necessary in the successful adoption of innovative policy and practice (Aarons et al., 2014).

In a recent study, Lambert et al. (2016) explored the relative importance of various supports in implementing evidence-based policy in child welfare agencies. The authors were especially interested in exploring the understanding of identified implementation strategies from the perspective of frontline employees (Lambert et al., 2016). Through interviews with frontline staff in three child welfare agencies across three states, the authors were able to identify best practices that were instrumental in the successful adoption of evidence-based policy in all three agencies. The establishment of an organizational climate conducive to change was identified by the authors as highly important with regards to policy adoption, ranking only below resource allocation in level

of importance (Lambert et al., 2016). In fact, Lambert et al. cited assessment of

organizational climate as the first step in planning for implementation of new policy or

practice and suggested that leaders seek input from internal and external stakeholders to

accomplish the assessment. Obtaining frontline employees' perspectives was cited as a

difficult task that leaders must proactively initiate in order to get an accurate picture of

organizational climate (Lambert et al., 2016). Specific leadership behavior that promoted

a positive organizational climate included the initiation of candid conversations between

leaders and front-line employees regarding the reasons for new policy, determining the

expectations of front-line employees with regard to policy adoption, and clarifying how

the new policy might impact the workload of frontline employees. The authors also

suggested that leaders could create a level of transparency by acknowledging previous

failed policy during conversations with frontline employees. This strategy, they found,

was common in organizational climates equipped to successfully adopt new policy

(Lambert et al., 2016).

Silver Wolf et al. (2014) identified organizational climate as a significant

determinant of successful policy adoption in a child welfare agency. The authors

cautioned that when such a climate has *not* been established, it is difficult to implement

and adopt innovative policy (Silver Wolf et al., 2014). Using a quantitative methodology,

the authors sought to determine the congruence between the perceptions of frontline staff

and leadership with regards to organizational climate. Through the use of surveys, the

authors collected data from frontline employees and leadership. Silver Wolf et al.

compared the results from the two groups and found that leaders had a much more

positive perception of the organizational climate than did those working on the front

lines. The authors suggested that the lack of congruence in perceptions signified the need

for "interventions that can improve communication and cohesiveness" (Silver Wolf et al.,

2014, p. 215) between top management and frontline staff.   In such an environment, the

authors noted, the leader's active role in the creation of consistent communication

channels is paramount to the establishment of an organizational climate conducive to

policy adoption (Silver Wolf et al., 2014).

Research conducted by Aarons et al. (2016) called for the continued study of the

role of child welfare leaders in establishing a climate that is conducive to successful

adoption of evidence-based interventions. The authors cited the importance of the

executive leader's role in the creation of leadership training opportunities designed to

improve leadership skills of local-level leaders to include exposure to training that

"emphasized creating a positive climate for implementation" (Aarons et al., 2016, p. 15).

They found that leaders also impact organizational climate by creation of a supportive

environment where frontline employees are actively recruited to participate in the

decision-making process (Aarons et al., 2016). Such an environment includes the

delivery of consistent messaging relative to the innovation as well as setting clear

expectations for adoption (Aarons et al., 2016).

In an earlier study, Spath, Strand, and Bosco-Ruggiero (2013) found that

organizational climate was positively impacted by leaders who provided consistent

communication and who included frontline employees in the decision-making process.

The authors conducted a qualitative study to explore the reasons for quantitative findings

of a previous study conducted to examine factors that impact organizational climate in a

child welfare agency. Utilizing focus groups, Spath et al. found that the leaders'

intentional creation of opportunities for staff to participate in the decision-making process

had a positive impact on organizational climate. Other strategies utilized by leaders to

positively impact organizational climate included consistent communication between

leaders and staff with regard to potential changes; leadership acknowledgement of

adverse working conditions and provision of support to alleviate undue stress; and,

recognition of staff potential by creating opportunities for professional, educational, and

leadership growth (Spath et al., 2013).

Leaders as Resource Allocators

The literature finds that a leader's ability to identify and allocate appropriate

resources is a significant factor in the successful implementation and adoption of policy

in a child welfare agency (Aarons et al., 2014; Alvarez, 2016; Lambert et al., 2016). The

failure of leadership to timely identify and allocate appropriate resources can create lags

in implementation that subsequently interrupt policy adoption at the local level (Alvarez,

2016; Willging et al., 2015). While obvious resources such as funding, equipment, and

materials are important, Lambert et al. (2016) stressed the need for leaders to allocate

staff, initial and ongoing training, and time. Aarons et al. (2014) echoed this caveat and

elaborated on the leaders' responsibility to allocate *time*. Specifically, the authors

concluded that leaders who create opportunities to remain visibly involved in the day to

day operations of policy implementation have a positive impact on the subsequent

adoption of the policy (Aarons et al., 2014). Aarons et al. specifically encouraged leader

allocation of time through participation in local-level training and meetings *with their employees* as opposed to the creation of separate trainings for staff and for leadership. The authors found that leaders who participated in training with their staff had a positive impact on the full adoption of policy at the local level.

With budget constraints and the expectation that child welfare agencies must do more with less (Alvarez, 2016), the level of ongoing resource allocation sends a message to employees regarding the importance of the policy being implemented (Aarons et al., 2014; Lambert et al., 2016). In fact, according to the findings of a study conducted by Lambert et al. (2016), resource allocation ranked highest in terms of key leadership components impacting the adoption of policy in a child welfare agency. The authors conducted a qualitative study of policy implementation in child welfare agencies across three states and found that while overall leadership commitment was important, it was the leaders' commitment *to the allocation of resources* that was most frequently referenced as most important by study participants (Lambert et al., 2016).

In addition to providing tangible resources such as equipment and material, the allocation of time and human resources was paramount to the successful adoption of policy (Lambert et al., 2016). Leaders in one state hired consultants during the exploration stage to assist in the actual creation of the policy and later to support staff training and coaching during the implementation process (Lambert et al., 2016). The leaders' creation of cross-departmental employee driven workgroups was also effective in the identification and evaluation of existing and needed resources that leaders subsequently incorporated into the implementation strategy. One common theme

throughout the study was the leaders' role in allocating *time* by limiting or balancing competing priorities (Lambert et al., 2016). One measure taken to accomplish this goal was the creation and funding of new positions specifically designed to move implementation forward (Lambert et al., 2016).

Although allocation of financial resources may be difficult due to strained budgets, Aarons et al. (2014) found that leaders who were creative in the allocation of resources had a positive impact on the adoption of innovative policy. The authors noted that leaders' allocation of employee rewards and recognition was impactful on the adoption of innovative policy. Spath et al. (2013) drew a similar conclusion from their research on organizational climate in a child welfare agency. The authors found that leaders who creatively allocated employee rewards and recognition had a positive impact on the creation of an organizational climate that embraced change (Spath et al., 2013). Whether allocating a minimal financial reward for successful policy adoption or the leaders' public recognition of a specific unit or individual, allocating a reward for successful adoption of policy has been found to send a clear message regarding the level of importance assigned to the policy (Aarons et al., 2014; Spath et al., 2013).

The responsibility for decisions regarding the allocation of resources need not rest solely on organizational leadership. Leaders can do more with less by strategically allocating human resources in the form of work groups (Aarons et al., 2014) or stakeholder collaborations (Aaron et al., 2011; Green et al., 2016). The use of agency work groups comprised of lower level leaders was highlighted by Aarons et al. (2014) as a means for executive leaders to allocate human resources to serve as think tanks to

address problems arising during the policy implementation stage and to provide onsite support to frontline employees responsible for policy implementation. Aarons et al. (2011) included executive leader creation of diverse stakeholder collaborations involving community partners as an important resource in "troubleshooting, problem-solving, procurement of funds for sustainability, and ongoing technical support" (p. 16). The creation of multi-level internal stakeholder collaborations is equally important in the adoption of policy as such collaborations promote multi-level policy commitment by allowing those directly responsible for policy implementation to have a say in what and how resources are allotted (Green et al., 2016). As leaders allocate resources, financial or otherwise, to support the implementation of policy, they are sending a clear indication that the policy is important.

Summary and Conclusion

The state's Educational Stability Policy is an innovative policy that was developed in response to a federal mandate that required child welfare agencies to better monitor the educational wellbeing of children in foster care. This innovative policy requires that all school-age foster children be referred to the agency's Education Unit for connection to academic assessment, advocacy, or tutoring. In its fourth year of implementation, the ESP has yet to be fully adopted in all 14 regions across the state.

A review of the literature suggests that leadership plays a significant role in the successful adoption of policy. Rogers's (1995) DOI posits that leaders, both formal and informal, must serve as innovation champions at all levels of the organization by providing continued support and guidance from innovation implementation to adoption.

Formal leaders play a significant role in the creation of opportunities to include informal leaders as policy champions (Schleien & Miller, 2010). Leaders also play a significant role in the establishment of an organizational climate where employees are open to change which is paramount to the successful implementation and adoption of innovative policy (Aarons & Sommerfeld, 2012; Aarons et al., 2014; Aarons et al., 2016). Through the allocation of resources, provision of initial and ongoing training, coaching, and consistent communication, leaders establish a fertile foundation for successful policy implementation and adoption (Aarons et al., 2016).

While much research has been conducted on the implementation of policy and evidence-based interventions in various disciplines, there are few studies that explore the role of leadership in policy adoption in child welfare agencies (Aarons et al., 2016; Meloy et al., 2015). What's more, the existing literature provides comparison, analysis, or exploration of multiple child welfare agencies as opposed to providing an exploration of a singular state child welfare agency at its local levels. The purpose of the present study was to explore how local-level leaders may or may not have impacted the successful adoption of ESP in one county under the jurisdiction of the state's CWA.

Chapter 3 provides a detailed discussion of the qualitative research method and the case study design and rationale. In addition, I provide a description of my role as the researcher that includes measures taken to address researcher bias. The methods utilized in participant selection are presented and followed by a detailed discussion of the data collection procedures to include the pilot study. The chapter ends with an in-depth

discussion of the method used for data analysis, issues of trustworthiness, and ethical

procedures.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the impact of local-level leaders on the successful adoption of the ESP in one county of the state's CWA. The literature suggested that child welfare agencies typically struggle to implement policy to improve services for vulnerable populations and that this is an area worthy of additional study (Aarons & Sommerfeld, 2012; Akin et al., 2016). The ESP is a policy designed to improve the educational wellbeing of the state's foster children, and the full adoption of this innovative policy has a direct impact on this vulnerable population.

In this chapter, I provide discussion on the research design and rationale. I address my role as the researcher and acknowledge any biases. The methodology section includes discussion of the population, sample, sampling method, and participant criteria. This section also includes a discussion about the instruments and pilot study procedures. The data collection and analysis procedures are discussed in detail, followed by issues of trustworthiness and ethical procedures.

Research Design and Rationale

Through the use of a qualitative case study design, I sought to answer the following research question: How do local-level leaders impact the adoption of education policy in a child welfare agency? The qualitative methodology allows researchers to develop a rich narrative that captures the essence of the phenomenon from the perspective of the participants (O'Sullivan et al., 2008). Qualitative research also allows the researcher flexibility to follow the natural flow of an interview so as to develop an in-

depth understanding of an issue (Creswell, 2013). While a quantitative methodology may

have been appropriate for measuring the significance of leadership for policy adoption or

the efficacy of the ESP, the purpose of this study was to *explore* and explain leadership

factors that contribute to successful adoption of the ESP at the local level. In addition, in

this study, I focused on the unique perspectives of frontline employees in a county that

had successfully adopted the ESP. The qualitative methodology was most effective for

achieving the purpose of this study and was therefore the appropriate methodology

choice.

In this research, I employed a qualitative case study design. Case study is best

used when the focus is on developing a comprehensive understanding and analysis of one

or more cases (Lewis-Beck, Bryman, & Futing Liao, 2004). The case study design also

allows the researcher to study a group of individuals to understand their perceptions

about an issue or program (Creswell, 2013). Using the case study design, I was able to

explore detailed information from frontline employees regarding the strategies and

actions that leaders took to implement the guidelines and provisions of the state-

mandated ESP in a single county under the jurisdiction of the state's CWA.

Other qualitative designs, such as narrative research, phenomenology, and

grounded theory, were dismissed from consideration for the study because their focus did

not support the purpose of this study. The narrative design is appropriate when the

researcher seeks to understand and narrate the lived experiences of one or two individuals

and to retell their stories (Creswell, 2013). This design was not appropriate for the

research because the experience of one or two individuals would not have provided

insight into the impact that leaders had on policy adoption. The intent of the

phenomenological design is to study several individuals who may live or work in

different locations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2012); however, the goal of this study was to

understand the perceptions of individuals who worked in *one* location. Based on their

intent, neither narrative inquiry nor phenomenological design would have been

appropriate for achieving the goal of the study. Grounded theory also would not have

been appropriate for this study because the purpose of the study was not to develop a

theory, but to use the DOI framework to explore how leaders influenced policy adoption

at the local level. Finally, ethnography was dismissed from consideration as a viable

design because the focus of ethnography is on studying a group by becoming immersed

in the culture (Creswell, 2013). Although in this study I did consider the leader's role in

establishing an organizational climate conducive to policy adoption, the purpose of this

study was not to conduct an in-depth exploration of the culture of the county selected as

the case for study.

Role of the Researcher

My role as the researcher was to collect and analyze data, discuss findings, and

arrive at a conclusion that provided a response to the research question. It is commonly

accepted that qualitative research involves the researcher as the instrument (Denzin &

Lincoln, 2012). As a qualitative researcher, I personally collected all data through

document reviews and semistructured interviews. My role as the researcher was to

ensure that participants were comfortable in sharing information truthfully. In order to

establish a rapport that encouraged open and honest dialogue, it was and remains

essential that participant and county names are held in the strictest confidence. To that end, I used pseudonyms for participants, and the county under study is simply referred to as "the county." To further assist in making participants feel comfortable in sharing information, I engaged in dialogue with each participant to ensure the participant's full understanding of the study. This initial conversation provided the opportunity for potential participants to ask any questions they may have had prior to obtaining their written consent as study participants.

Chenail (2011) cautioned that qualitative researchers must initially acknowledge and be continually cognizant of personal bias. Chenail stressed the importance of openly documenting one's bias in the narrative so as to make clear any distinctions between the interpretation of the data and the researcher's own perspectives. As the research instrument, I am keenly aware that I do carry with me my own personal bias. Specifically, during my 8 years of previous employment with the state's CWA, I developed an understanding of the unique educational challenges faced by children in foster care. My experience lent a sense of urgency with regard to the full adoption of ESP across the state. Chenail's contention that awareness of one's bias is important in the avoidance of researcher bias resonated well with me. As a lifelong educational advocate, I am passionate about the education of vulnerable populations. As such, I was eager to explore the reasons for lack of statewide adoption of policy designed to enhance the educational wellbeing of children in foster care. It was important for me to acknowledge and remain cognizant of my bias throughout the study so as to avoid allowing it to impact my conclusions.

While acknowledgment of personal bias is important, Creswell (2013) warned that it is imperative that the researcher plan for how that bias will be managed. To that end, I used the bracketing method to acknowledge and document my personal and professional opinions about the leader's role in adoption of the ESP. Identifying my preconceptions about the topic of study prior to beginning my research was an important step in separating my perspectives from those of each participant (Vicary, Young, & Hicks, 2017). Bracketing was especially important because of my familiarity with the ESP and my passion for its full adoption. In addition to bracketing my perspectives prior to the start of my research, I used a reflective journal to chronicle personal reflections and insights that surfaced throughout the research. This strategy, encouraged by Ortlipp (2008) and Chenail (2011), allowed me to identify previously "unrecognized thoughts, feelings, and impressions" (Chenail, 2011, p. 259) that surfaced during the processes of data collection and analysis. The reflective journal increased the transparency of the research by providing me with opportunities for continual critical self-reflection about any known or unknown bias with regard to the research topic (Ortlipp, 2008). Documentation of such biases allowed for constant comparison of my personal reflections to the insights and perceptions gleaned from participants as a way to verify that I had not inserted my own bias into their responses.

Methodology

Prior to the collection of any data, I obtained university Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. Walden's IRB approval number for this study is 05-31-18-

0513708. I also obtained IRB approval from the state's CWA. The agency IRB approval number is 171104 and it expires on April 13, 2019.

Pilot Study

I developed the semistructured interview (Appendix A) and conducted a pilot study to ensure content validity through the refinement of interview questions. Upon agency and university IRB approval, I conducted the pilot study with a sample of three employees from the region in which I was working at the time. To decrease the potential for bias due to researcher familiarity with participants, pilot study participants were recruited from those employees to whom I had convenient access but no professional or personal ties. To that end, I recruited participants from a neighboring county office within the region, thereby excluding volunteers employed in the same county in which I was employed at the time of the pilot.   I initiated recruitment of pilot study participants by requesting that the county director in a neighboring county distribute a recruitment flyer (Appendix B) to all county-level employees via email and posting throughout the county office. The criteria for participation in the pilot study mirrored the criteria for participation in the actual study.   All interviews for the pilot study were conducted via telephone after work hours. Upon completion of the pilot study, I promptly reviewed the responses to identify common themes and to consider their alignment with the research question. Minor refinement of the interview questions was needed based on the level to which the responses answered, contributed, or provided new themes relative to the research question.

To ensure optimum content validity, I employed suggestions made by Chenail (2011), beginning with asking for participants' feedback regarding their perceptions on the level of difficulty of each question. Questions that were identified as ambiguous, unnecessary, or difficult to understand were refined or eliminated based on participant feedback. It was also important that each question in the interview protocol elicited a wide range of responses (Chenail, 2011). Similarity in responses from all participants might have been an indication that I had developed the questions with the expectation of a certain response or that they were not open-ended enough to encourage rich dialogue. To ensure that the questions were free from any bias I may have held, I purposely listened for and explored divergent responses in an effort to challenge myself to focus on participant responses rather than my own thoughts and feelings. Questions that did not elicit rich dialogue were reworded. Finally, I employed Chenail's suggestion that the researcher use the pilot study as a "test run" (p. 257) to record the time taken for each interview and to make appropriate adjustments to either the questions or the timeframe indicated on the consent agreement.

Participant Selection

The targeted participants included current CWA case managers who were assigned to a county-level permanency unit within the county under study. The county was selected based on a 90% ESP compliance rate as measured by number of foster youth referred to the Education Unit divided by number of foster youth in the legal custody of the county. I used the assistance of a sponsor assigned by the agency to secure data relative to county-level ESP compliance rates. The study was limited to case

managers assigned to permanency units based on their responsibility for the

implementation of the ESP through the initiation of a referral to the Education Unit.

Duration of employment was an additional consideration, as newly hired employees

would not have had firsthand knowledge of efforts employed by leaders to fully adopt

ESP within their county. That being said, all participants were required to have been

employed in their position for a minimum of 1 year prior to the date of the interview.

After having gained appropriate IRB approval from the CWA and the university

and having conducted the pilot study, I identified the case for study following the

protocol previously discussed. All recruitment efforts were overseen by a CWA sponsor

who served as my initial point of contact with local-level agency leadership. After I

identified the county for study, the CWA sponsor made initial contact with that county's

director. During that initial communication between the two, the county director agreed

to allow access to his case managers for the purpose of conducting telephone interviews.

The CWA sponsor then authorized me to make contact with the county director to further

explain my study and to request his cooperation in the dissemination of the recruitment

flyer (Appendix B). I initiated contact with the county director via email, and he

responded immediately. During our communications, I gave a thorough description of my

study and requested his assistance with recruitment. The county director had no questions

and directed me to forward the recruitment flyer to his county administrator. I then

initiated contact with the county administrator and forwarded the recruitment flyer to her

for dissemination to all permanency unit case managers employed in the county. The

county administrator assisted in the recruitment process by sending the flyer via email and by posting the flyer in common areas throughout the county office.

With the assistance of the county administrator, and by using the purposeful and snowball sampling methods, I was successful in the recruitment of five case managers, all of whom confirmed that they met the criteria for participation in my study. While the original intent was to conduct 10 to 12 interviews, the homogeneity of the five participants resulted in saturation by the fourth interview. Early saturation is a common outcome of purposeful sampling that by definition requires that participants meet a specific criteria (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). This was the case in my study, as all participants met the criteria of working in the same geographical location, being assigned to the same department, holding the same position, and having been employed for longer than 1 year. In addition, because the population of permanency unit case managers in the county was 10, data collection from a smaller sample was appropriate.

The first three participants initiated contact with me via telephone. During each initial conversation, I gave each participant a detailed description of the purpose of my study, including an overview of the informed consent agreement that was subsequently emailed to each participant for signature and return. The fourth and fifth participants were identified using the snowball sampling method. As such, Participants 4 and 5 were the only participants with whom I initiated contact. At the beginning of both conversations, I introduced myself and informed each participant that she had been referred by a colleague as a potential participant in my research. I then provided both with a detailed description of the purpose of my study and the expectations and rights of

each as a participant. As Participants 4 and 5 agreed to participate, I then emailed the informed consent agreements for signature and return to me.

Instrumentation

The data collection for this study began with my review of the Education Unit *Quarterly Report*, which was used for the sole purpose of identification of the county for study. This report was provided to me by the Education Unit data manager with permission from the sponsor assigned to me through the Agency IRB. The Education Unit *Quarterly Report* represented the most reliable source of information related to the percentage of children and youth referred to the Education Unit by region. This report is considered reputable because per the Education Unit data manager, it is a public record that is published quarterly by the state's CWA and can be obtained by written request to the data manager.

Semistructured interviews were the primary data collection instrument used in this study. The interview provided the best source of data, as the purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of frontline staff with regard to local-level leader impact on policy adoption. To ensure content validity of data collected through interviews, I used themes identified in the literature review to develop the framework for the initial interview protocol. The initial interview questions were slightly modified based on the outcomes of the pilot study, which was implemented to ensure that the interview questions were sufficient to answer the research question. All participants were asked the same series of questions as a baseline so as to provide a common framework for participants' responses. Conducting the pilot study assisted me in the refinement of

ambiguous or difficult questions so as to ensure that the final interview protocol

(Attachment A) was sufficient to answer the research question.

Data Collection Procedures

Creswell (2013) heralded observations and interviews as the two most common

methods of qualitative data collection. The author went on to state that in the absence of

opportunity to directly observe participants in their natural setting, the interview is most

appropriate (Creswell, 2013). In an effort to ensure confidentiality of participant

identities, I assumed responsibility as the sole collector of all data. As anticipated,

interview data were collected over a 60-day period and there were four encounters with

each participant: initial introduction, actual interview, member checking of transcripts,

and member checking of findings. All communication with participants occurred via

email and telephone.

As previously described, I enlisted the cooperation of the county director in the

recruitment of potential participants. Upon receipt of the signed consent agreement for

each participant, I moved forward with the scheduling of telephone interviews. At the

beginning of each interview, I reminded each participant that the interview would be

recorded. I utilized a primary and back up audio recorder to ensure data were collected

without technological challenges. There were no such challenges, and the use of a high-

quality audio recorder proved essential to the accurate transcription of each interview. I

also utilized a reflective journal to take notes relative to the research processes and

practices, decision-making processes with regards to research progress, thoughts for

additional research, personal insights, and field notes. The reflective journal proved helpful in developing my conclusions.

I manually transcribed each interview as it was completed. I then began the member checking process by sharing the transcriptions with participants via email to verify the accuracy of my transcription and to seek clarification of discrepant cases where needed. None of the participants reported any discrepancies and each was in agreement that their interview was accurately transcribed. Despite the extensive time spent transcribing and member checking, the experience was beneficial in that it allowed me to become intimately familiar with the data. This familiarity greatly assisted me as I moved through the analysis stage.

Data Analysis Procedures

Once all data were collected, I employed a variation of Colaizzi's (1978) approach to data analysis. This seven step approach included: (a) reading the transcripts and documents, (b) identification of words and phrases, (c) formulation of meanings, (d) categorizing by theme, (e) inclusion of comprehensive description of findings, (f) description of fundamental structure of the phenomenon, (g) member checking findings.

The first step in this process involved my reading and re-reading the interview transcripts to get a general understanding of the entire content of the data. This initial step was difficult because I had to fight the urge to move straight to words and phrases that seemed to jump out at me and instead focus on the totality of the content. During this step, I also reviewed the type written version of my research journal that included my previously bracketed thoughts and feelings regarding how leaders impacted the

successful adoption of ESP. The bracketing method was an important measure taken in

this research because, as suggested by Goldblatt and Band-Winterstein (2016), it

challenged me to focus on participant perspectives rather than my own.

Step two included yet a third round of transcript review. During this round of

review, I began the process of open coding. I highlighted recurring words and phrases

that pertained to the sole research question: How do local-level leaders impact the

adoption of education policy in a child welfare agency? This step also included the

introduction of a coding journal. I used this journal to document and organize key words

and phrases from the interview to be used as examples when writing Chapter 5.

In step three I continued to focus on my notes in the coding journal to forge

meaning from each of the highlighted words or phrases. By reading and re-reading the

highlighted data, broad meanings of each word and phrase began to emerge. I

documented those broad meanings in my coding journal. It was especially important to

remain present and connected to the actual words and phrases in order to remain neutral

in developing broad meanings. There were occasions when I needed to step away from

the work of coding in order to journal and then compartmentalize my own thoughts and

feelings so they were not reflected in the coding process.

In step four I began the process of sorting each broad meaning into categories.

During this process, I utilized both template and axial coding. According to Blair (2015),

the use of a "combined approach" (p. 26) of template and axial coding reduces bias in the

findings as the two methods "speak to, and counter one another" (p. 26). Blair (2015)

further described template coding as the use of pre-defined themes or "a priori codes"

(p.16) that most often emerge from the literature or selected theory. Template coding

requires the interviewer to use a top down approach in identifying a priori codes but also

requires that the researcher remain open to new themes that emerge from the bottom up

during the data collection process (Blair, 2015). Blair stated that the continued

refinement of the template of codes is necessary as it is difficult to be certain that the a

priori codes are in fact the most appropriate. Baralt (2012) urged the constant

consideration of the purpose of the study when identifying or refining the template codes.

The literature review conducted for the study clearly revealed four themes related

to the impact of leadership on policy adoption: formal leaders as champions; intentional

inclusion of informal leaders as champions; leaders as resource allocators; and, leaders

and organizational climate. As suggested by Blair (2015), I assigned a priori codes to

these four themes while remaining prepared to utilize the axial coding method to refine

codes based on what the data presented. I began the process of template coding by once

again reviewing my coding journal to determine if any of the themes identified in step

three should clearly be assigned to any of the four a priori themes identified through the

review of literature. During this step of the data analysis process, I found no difficulty in

assigning a total of 19 codes to one of the four a priori themes, but I was uncertain about

how to assign the remaining 4 codes.

Blair (2015) described axial coding as a bottom-up approach whereby the

researcher identifies themes based on their emergence from the transcribed interviews

and document review. In an effort to allow the text to speak for itself, I continued to read

and re-read the remaining four codes hopeful that an additional theme or themes would

emerge. After many reviews of the data using the axial coding method, I continued to face the challenge of where to assign the four remaining codes. As a result, I temporarily stepped away from the process.

Steps five and six of the data analysis process were done simultaneously. During step five, I again reviewed my assignment of codes to themes. Using my coding journal, I highlighted direct quotes that provided the rich description found later in the Research Findings section of Chapter 4. It was through the highlighting of direct quotes that the text began to speak for itself and the theme of *connection between policy and practice* eventually emerged as the fifth and final theme. The process of taking a second look at my process of assigning codes to themes also provided an opportunity for me to re-evaluate the appropriateness of each assignment, reduce any redundancy across themes, or to eliminate any themes that did not align with the purpose of the study. After yet a third look at my assignment of codes to themes, I was comfortable with the assignments as well as the addition of the fifth theme: *Connection between Policy and Practice*.

Issues of Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of qualitative research has long been scrutinized by those in the field of quantitative research (Loh, 2013). In order to make a positive contribution to the field of qualitative research, it was an important part of my role as researcher to take measures to ensure the trustworthiness of the research approach and the findings from the research. Loh (2013) stated that trustworthiness in qualitative research occurs when researchers take intentional steps to enhance the transferability, credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the research.

Transferability

Transferability is the degree to which study results can be transferred to other populations (Loh, 2013; Morse, 2015; Shenton, 2004). Transferability is difficult with most qualitative case study designs as the conclusions drawn from data collected from a specific and small sample may not necessarily transfer to a larger population (Shenton, 2004, Loh, 2013). Both Shenton (2004) and Loh (2013) cited the researcher's obligation to provide the reader with as detailed description as possible to allow the reader to gain a full and accurate picture of the phenomena and context of the study. To that end, I included such details as background, phenomena, boundaries, population, case study location, and the process and timeframe of data collection. Such detailed descriptions, argued Shenton, allow the reader to draw their own conclusions regarding the likelihood of transferability to situations with which they are familiar. The thick description of data combined with detailed description of context and phenomena of the research enhances the transferability of this research project.

Credibility

The congruence between the findings and what they are intended to measure in a qualitative study is referred to as credibility (Shenton, 2004). Credibility of the research and findings of this study was enhanced through the use of triangulation and member checking. O'Cathain et al. (2010) described triangulation as the process of converging of data from different sources to develop a deeper understanding of the research topic. Similarly, Griffee (2005) described triangulation as "the comparison of at least two sources of data" (p. 37) to strengthen the credibility of the data analysis. In this study, I

triangulated the data from participant responses with findings from the literature review and with premises of the theoretical orientation. Details and results of the triangulation are presented in Chapter 5.

In addition to triangulation I used member checking to enhance the credibility of my research and findings. This strategy involved participant review of their transcribed interviews to confirm that I had accurately captured the intent of their responses (Loh, 2013; Shenton, 2004). Member checking also included my request that the participants verify the accuracy of any emerging themes or codes identified during my analysis of the data (Shenton, 2004). As detailed in the data collection section, participants were provided with an electronic copy of my transcription of their interview responses. Participants were asked to review the transcripts to determine how accurately the transcripts reflected their perceptions. I then initiated a follow up telephone conversation with each participant to confirm the accuracy of their responses as transcribed. As described previously, each of the five participants confirmed the accuracy of the transcriptions with no revisions.

Saturation, which can be described as the point when no new information is forthcoming (Francis, et al., 2010; Griffee, 2005; Guest et al., 2006), is the final strategy to enhance credibility of the study. In a study conducted by Guest et al. (2006), the authors found that when utilizing interviews, the point of saturation was contingent upon "interview structure…content…and participant homogeneity" (p. 75). The authors described the importance of using semistructured, private interviews so as to avoid the possibility of intentional duplication of answers. Further warning was given with regard

to interview content as the authors encouraged utilization of the same questions for all participants. Straying too far from the established questions or utilizing different questions, they cautioned, would make saturation unobtainable (Guest et al., 2006). To ensure that I was able to reach a point of saturation, I followed the same interview protocol with each of the five participants. That protocol included semistructured interview questions in a private one on one session using the same interview questions for each participant.

Dependability

Dependability is closely tied to confirmability which commonly results in the overlapping of techniques to enhance these two issues of trustworthiness (Shenton, 2004). The qualitative equivalent of reliability, dependability requires the researcher to utilize techniques to enhance the probability that a researcher conducting the same study, in the same manner, with the same data collection procedures, would present the same findings (Shenton, 2004). Triangulation is one technique common to both confirmability and dependability. As described previously, I enhanced the dependability of the data by employing the triangulation technique to converge data collected from the literature review, theoretical orientation, and participant interview. Details from the triangulation are presented in Chapter 5. In addition to triangulation, the creation of an audit trail is a technique employed by researchers to enhance the dependability of qualitative research. One version of this technique is described by Shenton (2004) as a detailed documentation "which allows any observer to trace the course of the research step-by-step via the decisions made and procedures described" (p. 72). With this definition in mind, I utilized

a reflective journal to record the detailed, chronological description of each step in my research procedure to include any rational for decisions made.

Confirmability

Shenton (2004) described confirmability as the qualitative equivalent to objectivity in a quantitative study and stressed the importance of avoiding researcher bias when forming conclusions based on the data collected from participants. Reflexivity is a common strategy used to establish confirmability. This strategy is described by Creswell and Miller (2000) as the researcher's disclosure of personal "beliefs, assumptions and biases" (p.127). Maintaining a reflective journal is one way to enhance the credibility of this study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) described the reflective journal as the personal writings of the researcher that capture the researcher's insights and values. In addition, the reflective journal is a necessary tool to clearly document the decision-making processes with regards to research progress (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). By maintaining a reflective journal, I have enhanced the confirmability of this study by documenting my personal reflections during interviews and by documenting the progress of the study in detail in an effort to allow the reader to "trace the course of the research step-by-step via the decisions made and procedures described" (Shenton, 2004, p. 72).

Procedures to Address Ethical Dilemmas

Establishing clear procedures that address potential ethical dilemmas is necessary in all research dealing with human subjects (Jaspers, Houtepen, & Hortsman, 2013). The research had the potential for several ethical dilemmas that are discussed and planned for in this section. The first dilemma is the fact that I conducted the research in an agency in

which I previously worked. This presented an ethical dilemma because there was the possibility that I may have had a personal or professional connection to participants that might have been perceived as a conflict of interest. To minimize any ethical dilemmas regarding conflict of interest or perceived personal connections, the participants in this study were purposefully recruited from a CWA office other than the one in which I previously worked. Because I had never worked in any other office, this strategy ensured that I had no personal nor professional relationship with any of the participants. Discussions with my agency sponsor indicated that this measure was sufficient and that my previous employment with the agency would not preclude me from conducting the study.

Stevenson-Thorpe (2014) considered participant withdrawal to be an ethical data collection concern. First, the loss of actual data provided by a participant who withdraws consent can no longer be utilized unless a clear transfer of data rights has been previously established. Using the data without the signed transfer of data rights presents a violation of ethics (Stevenson-Thorpe, 2014). Second, Stevenson-Thorpe warned that the data collected prior to participant withdrawal can be destroyed, but the themes, concepts, and perspectives may remain in the mind of the researcher. This, Stevenson-Thorpe contended, raises the ethical concern of researcher bias. Although the challenge of participant withdrawal was not an issue in this study, I took steps to plan for this ethical dilemma by explicitly including the transfer of data rights from participant to researcher in the informed consent document.

Treatment of data is the final ethical concern to be planned for. First, to preserve the confidentiality of participants, I utilized pseudonyms throughout the study to include referencing of the identified county as "the county." With regards to data storage, I followed the advice of Creswell (2013) who admonished researchers to take great precaution in the handling and storing of collected data. To that end, all transcripts of interviews have been stored on an external hard drive with a back-up saved to a flash drive. Both storage devices, along with hard copies of transcribed interviews and the journal documenting my observations and personal insights, have been placed in a locked, fireproof safe in my home. All information relative to the study will remain in my possession for a period of 5 years. All information likely to identify participants has been removed and replaced with pseudonyms to further protect the anonymity of the participants. At the end of the 5 year mark, the data will be destroyed via shredding or deletion from the storage devices.

Summary

This study was important as it was designed to explore the impact of leadership on successful policy adoption at the local level within one child welfare agency. Using DOI as a theoretical framework, my goal was to gain information about how leaders impact successful policy adoption at the local level. Such findings are important to the implementation of future CWA policy and may influence the manner in which policy is introduced, implemented, and subsequently adopted throughout this CWA.

Chapter 3 began with a discussion of the research design and rationale. A qualitative case study design was most appropriate because the purpose of this study was

to explore and understand the perceptions of a group of people (Creswell, 2013). Other designs were considered and dismissed based on the fact that their intended use was not in alignment with the purpose of this study. Following the discussion of research design and rationale, I provided detail regarding my role as the researcher. This discussion included acknowledgement of my own researcher bias and measures I took to increase the validity of my study.

In the methodology section of Chapter 3, I provided detailed information regarding the population, sample, sampling method, and participant criteria. This section also included a discussion about the pilot study procedures and data collection instruments. I then provided a detailed accounting of the data collection and analysis procedures to include my use of Colaizzi's (1978) seven step data analysis protocol. Following the methodology section, I provided a detailed description of strategies I employed in this study to address the four issues of qualitative inquiry trustworthiness: transferability, credibility, dependability, and confirmability. Such strategies as those described in the Issues of Trustworthiness section, were important to sustaining the level of scholarly research in this qualitative case study. While it is difficult to ensure the transferability of a qualitative study, I employed strategies to conduct rigorous data collection. In addition, I have done my due diligence in the presentation of my findings by providing a thick description of participants, locations, and research procedures. Credibility was enhanced through my triangulation of the data from literature review, theoretical orientation, and semistructured interviews. Reflective journaling was also important to the credibility of this study as was the two-phase process of member

checking to ensure that I had accurately captured the voices and perceptions of the

participants. The dependability of this research was enhanced through the triangulation of

the data and the use of a reflective journal as a means to document an audit trail.

Confirmability was the last issue of trustworthiness discussed in this chapter. I enhanced

the confirmability of this study through the use of a reflective journal in which I

documented my personal thoughts and insights throughout the research.

Chapter 3 ended with a discussion of three potential ethical dilemmas: personal or

professional connection to the participants, participant withdrawal, and treatment of data.

All three potential dilemmas were discussed to include the procedures that I employed to

address them throughout this study. Such strategies included eliminating the county

CWA office in which I previously worked from the list of potential counties in which to

conduct the study; transferring of data rights from participant to researcher at the

completion of the interview; and data storage and the use of pseudonyms. In Chapter 4, I

present the findings.

Chapter 4: Presentations of Findings

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of local-level leadership on the successful adoption of innovative education policy in a child welfare agency. The research question which guided this study was the following: How did local-level leaders impact the adoption of education policy in a child welfare agency? In this chapter, I provide an in-depth discussion of challenges related to the data collection process, pilot study procedures, research setting, participant profiles, data collection procedures, and data analysis. The bulk of the chapter focuses on a discussion of the research findings, and the chapter ends with a discussion of trustworthiness and a summary of the information presented.

Challenges and Resulting Revisions

Completing this study required sponsorship and cooperation from the state's CWA. Prior to the collection of any data, I was assigned a CWA sponsor who oversaw the data collection process and served as a liaison between me and agency leadership throughout the research. With assistance from the CWA sponsor serving as a liaison between myself and the Education Unit data manager, I was able to obtain numerical data relative to the county with the highest ESP compliance rate as identified by the percentage of Education Unit referrals generated. The CWA sponsor also provided guidance with the modification of data collection procedures as challenges arose regarding my resignation from the agency. During the pilot study, I was employed by the agency, but between the conclusion of the pilot and the beginning of the main study, I

resigned from my position at CWA. Although I left the organization in good standing, my resignation resulted in restrictions on my access to agency data. Because I was no longer an agency employee, the agency withdrew its consent in terms of allowing me to gather ESP-implementation-related documents such as meeting minutes and training records, because both included the names of staff, to which I could no longer be privy.

In addition to the data collection restrictions placed upon me due to my resignation, I encountered resistance from the leadership of the county with the highest ESP compliance rate. Despite my sponsor's advocacy of this study, the county director remained unwilling to provide cooperation in terms of participant recruitment and further data collection. As a result, and with the guidance of my agency sponsor, I requested the name of the county with the *second*-highest compliance rate. Those data were provided to me by the Education Unit data manager through my agency sponsor, who then initiated contact with the leadership of that county. After initial contact with the agency sponsor, the county director of County 2 was cooperative in terms of disseminating recruitment flyers to county-level case managers. I do not believe that the selection of the county with the second-highest rate of compliance influenced the interpretation of the study results. It is probable, however, that the restrictions on reviewing documents relative to the implementation of ESP detracted from the richness of data collected and my subsequent description in the findings.

Pilot Study

The pilot study was conducted as outlined in Chapter 3. A total of three participants were recruited from a rural county in close proximity to the county in which I

was working at the time of the pilot. Participants were recruited using a flyer (Appendix

B), which was disseminated via email by the county director. Prior to dissemination of

the flyer, I communicated with the county director via telephone to explain my study and

to answer any questions. The agency sponsor remained as a liaison between me and the

county director. My statements in my initial conversation with the county director

included a thorough description of my study and the need to conduct a pilot study to

determine whether the interview questions were sufficient to answer the research

question. The county director expressed that she was comfortable with the process and

agreed to disseminate my recruitment flyer via email and by posting the flyer in common

areas within the county office. Two weeks after the dissemination of the flyer, I had not

received any contact from potential participants, so I initiated a second call to the county

director. As a result of that call, the director sent out the flyer a second time. Within 3

days of that phone call, I received a call from the first participant. Two additional

participants made contact with me within 3 days following the first contact. I

interviewed three participants during the pilot study. All three participants were women

who ranged in age from 25 to 37 years. One participant was Caucasian, and two were

African-American. All three participants held a master's degree in social work (MSW),

and one was also a licensed master social worker (LMSW). All three had been employed

by the CWA in the permanency unit of the same rural county office for at least 1 year.

When I was contacted by each of the three participants, I provided an in-depth

explanation of the purpose of the pilot study and the main study and answered any

questions they had. I assured each participant of confidentiality, and all three agreed to

participate in the pilot study. Signed consent forms were obtained prior to beginning the interviews.

The interviews were conducted via telephone at times that were convenient for the participants. None of the interviews were conducted during the work day so as to avoid interruption of work duties. In addition, conducting the telephone interviews after work hours afforded participants the opportunity to choose surroundings in which they were comfortable. As anticipated, each interview was completed within the 1-hour time frame. However, follow-up discussions to obtain clarification on questions added 30 minutes to the total time spent with each participant. These follow-up discussions proved helpful in rewording Question 3 to reflect the case managers' responsibility to comply with the ESP by submitting Education Unit referrals.

Study Setting

There were no personal or organizational conditions made apparent to me that might have influenced the perceptions of any of the participants interviewed for this study. All participants were engaged and seemed to have a genuine interest in participating. There were no indications that the results of this study may have been unduly influenced by adverse personal or organizational conditions.

Demographics

This section provides a profile of each of the five participants interviewed in the main study. As stated in the informed consent agreement, I used pseudonyms to protect the identity of all participants. I will reference the participants as: Anne, Barbara, Candace, Danielle, and Erika. All five participants provided verbal confirmation that at

the time of interview each met the established criteria to participate in this study. Specifically, at the time of the interview, each of the five participants had been employed as a case manager in the permanency unit of the county office at the center of this study for a period of at least 1 full year.

Participant 1, Anne, was a 35-year-old Caucasian woman. Anne had been in her current position for 3 years. She was an LMSW. Participant 2, Barbara, was a 47-year-old Caucasian woman. Barbara had been with the agency for 5 years. Barbara held an MSW. Participant 3, Candace, was a 40-year-old Caucasian woman. Candace had been with the agency for 6 years. She held an MSW. Participant 4, Danielle, was a 28-year-old Caucasian woman. She had been with the agency for 2 years. She held an MSW and was currently pursuing her LMSW. Participant 5, Erika, was a 26-year-old Caucasian woman. She had been with the agency for 14 months and held an MSW.

Data Collection

I conducted all interviews via telephone at times that were most convenient for each of the five participants. None of the interviews were conducted during working hours, and most were conducted during weekends. I made contact with each participant a total of four times over a 60-day period. The initial contact was introductory in nature and included an in-depth discussion of the purpose of my study and assurance of confidentiality. The time frame for the introductory contact varied based on participant questions, but the longest time was 25 minutes. The purpose of the second contact was to conduct the actual interview. The average time spent interviewing was 1 hour, although one interview lasted 1.25 hours due to the verbose responses from the participant. Prior

to beginning each interview, I reviewed the informed consent agreement with each participant. I reminded each participant that participation was voluntary and that her identity would remain confidential. With the participant's consent, I recorded all interviews using a primary audio recorder and a backup audio recorder.

As described in the demographics section of this chapter, the participants were homogenous in terms of gender, race, education, position, and county of employment. Achieving data saturation is important to qualitative research. Guest et al. (2006) suggested that homogeneity of participants is one strategy to assist with achieving data saturation. Also important to saturation is the consistency of the interview structure and content. There were occasions when I asked follow-up, probing questions to delve deeper into an initial response, but overall, the interview structure remained the same for all participants. The combination of participant homogeneity and consistent interview structure was helpful in achieving data saturation.

The practice of bracketing my personal perspectives prior to beginning the interview process was extremely helpful. Doing this assisted in freeing me to remain focused on what was being said during the interviews instead of focusing on my own perceptions of how leadership impacts the successful adoption of policy. During each interview, I again employed the bracketing technique to occasionally jot down fleeting thoughts inspired by participant responses. At the conclusion of each interview, I dedicated several moments to journaling my thoughts and impressions relative to participant responses and the interview process. This process proved helpful when drawing conclusions and describing my findings, as it allowed me to separate and

compartmentalize my personal thoughts as distinct from those of the participants, so as to eliminate any bias on my part.

The audio recording for each interview was transcribed by me within hours of the interview. I transcribed each interview into a Word document and saved each transcription on a password-protected computer. Transcribing the interviews was tedious but rewarding. The continual playback required to capture every word deepened my level of understanding of the perspectives of each participant. After I transcribed each interview, I initiated a third contact with each participant to engage her in member checking, which consisted of sending the transcription of our interview via email. Each participant was asked to review the transcription and to respond via email if she felt the need for a follow-up telephone conversation to clarify or add to the transcribed responses. None of the five participants requested a follow-up conversation, and all confirmed that their interviews were accurate as transcribed. After receiving confirmation that no changes were needed for the transcriptions, I erased the audio recordings to protect the privacy of the participants.

The final step in the data collection process involved transferring the journal entries to a Word document. This proved challenging because my journal entries were hastily written and often included symbols instead of words to convey my feelings at a particular point in time. The practice of notating the time displayed on the recorder before each hastily written entry was helpful in later deciphering the words and symbols. Replaying the recording to determine what was being said at a particular moment allowed

me to relive my feelings at that particular point in time, thereby making sense of any difficult-to-decipher words and symbols.

Data Analysis

I used Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step approach to analyze the data. First, I read and reread each transcript to get a general understanding of the totality of the data collected from interviews. I repeated this process with a review of my bracketed thoughts documented in the reflective journal. After several reviews, I began the process of highlighting significant words and phrases that pertained to the sole research question regarding how leaders impact policy adoption. This process involved several rounds of transcript review and the assignment of a numerical code to each of the highlighted words and phrases. At the end of this process, I was able to cluster the codes to a total of 23 emergent themes. The next step involved the process of sorting each of the 23 emergent themes into categories using both template and axial coding methods.

Template coding was used to determine whether any of the 23 emergent themes were clearly connected to any of the four a priori themes identified in the literature review. In all, a total of 19 emergent themes were easily connected to the following a priori themes: formal leaders as policy champions; intentional inclusion of informal leaders as policy champions; leaders as resource allocators; and leaders and organizational climate. The remaining four emergent themes did not seem to easily connect with any of the a priori themes, so I continued the process of reviewing the highlighted words and phrases. Eventually, the text began to speak for itself, and the metatheme of *connection between policy and practice* emerged as the fifth and final

theme. The grouping of the majority of emergent themes to a priori themes was not a

difficult process. Highlighted words and phrases seemed to jump off the page, making an

obvious connection to one of the four themes identified in the literature. The grouping of

the four remaining emergent themes required additional study of the highlighted words

and phrases not easily connected to any of a priori themes. After a final review of how I

had assigned codes to emergent themes and emergent themes to a priori or metathemes, I

was satisfied that each assignment was appropriate. Table 1 outlines the grouping of the

emergent themes against the four a priori themes identified in the literature review and

against the metatheme that emerged from the interviews.

      After completing the coding process and assigning the 23 emergent themes to one

of the four a priori themes identified in the literature or to the metatheme that emerged

from the interview data, I moved to a final round of member checking. During this

process, I sent an email to participants with a request that they review Table 1 in

preparation for a follow-up telephone conversation. After 3 days, I initiated a follow-up

telephone conversation with each participant to confirm the accuracy with which the

emergent themes represented her responses in the interview. This round of member

checking was important to strengthen the credibility of the findings by ensuring that I had

captured the voices and perceptions of all participants (Loh, 2013; Shenton, 2004). The

emergent themes were confirmed as being an accurate reflection of participant responses.

Table 1

Grouping of Emergent Themes to Metathemes

Emergent theme	Total number of references	% of total codes	Total number of participants referencing code	Metatheme	Total number of references	% of total codes
Communicating importance of policy	4	3	3			
Identified subject matter expert	10	7	5			
Consistent focus on education	11	8	5	Formal leaders as policy champions	34	24
Celebrating success	5	3	3			
Supervisors modeling	2	1	1			
Sharing workload	2	1	2			
Seeing results	2	1	1			
Feedback loops	3	2	2		16	11
Trusting coworkers	4	3	3	Intentional inclusion of informal leaders as policy champions		
Opportunity for frontline input	7	5	4			
Staff resources	12	8	4			
Protected time	3	2	2	Leaders as resource allocators	30	21
Providing initial and ongoing training	15	10	5			
Departmental pride	2	1	3			
Support from coworkers	4	3	5			
Support from supervisors	6	4	5	Leaders and organizational climate	28	20
Support from other units	4	3	3			
Foster parent inclusion in focus on education	7	5	3			
Motivation	5	4	4			
Educational success stories	6	4	5			
Increased graduation rate	4	3	2	Connection between policy & practice	34	24
Understanding why the policy is important	16	11	5			
Increased level of confidence	8	6	3			

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility

Triangulation is a measure taken by researchers to increase credibility and is described by Griffee (2005) as "the comparison of at least two sources of data" (p. 37). The original plan was to triangulate data collected from agency documents, literature review, and data collected during participant interviews. Due to the challenges associated with my resignation from the CWA, a review of agency documents was no longer a viable option. Instead, I strengthened credibility through the triangulation of data collected from the literature review, theoretical orientation, and participant interviews. The strategy of member checking was equally important to the strengthening of credibility. This strategy was implemented in the manner outlined in Chapter 3. Participants were afforded the opportunity to review and make corrections to the transcripts of their own interviews and were given the opportunity to review the identification of themes and codes (Table 1) to confirm credibility of the conclusions.

Confirmability

The issue of confirmability was addressed by my use of a reflective journal in which I captured my thoughts, values, and insights throughout the data collection process. Shenton (2004) described this as a necessary strategy in avoiding researcher bias. I was often compelled to capture fleeting thoughts in my journal. This was especially common during the interview process when at times I became distracted by such thoughts despite my best efforts to stay fully engaged in the interview. Thankfully, because the interviews were recorded, I was still able to reflect on every word from every

participant when transcribing each interview. Reflecting on the data recorded in the journal was also helpful throughout the processes of data analysis and presentations of findings. The inclusion of my bracketed thoughts during data analysis allowed me to separate my perceptions from those of participants. When included in the reporting of the findings, my bracketed thoughts increased the richness of the findings as my thoughts were often at odds with the perceptions of participants.

In addition to using the journal to document my personal thoughts and feelings, I also recorded each step in the data collection process to include the variations from the original plan outlined in Chapter 3. The strategy of using the reflective journal to document the progress of my study allows the reader to follow the progression of each step in the study and to understand any decisions made that divert from the original protocol (Shenton, 2004).

Dependability

The issue of dependability was addressed much like the issue of confirmability: through the use of a reflective journal. In this journal, I documented each step of the data collection process in an effort to create an audit trail. The audit trail documented the chronological steps and decision-making process of the data collection process. This documentation also included any deviations from the original data collection plan presented in Chapter 3.

Transferability

As discussed in Chapter 3, it is widely accepted that transferability is difficult with most qualitative case study designs in general because data collected from smaller

sample sizes are less likely to be transferable to a larger population (Shenton, 2004, Loh, 2013). To address the issue of transferability, I provided a detailed description of the background, phenomena, boundaries, population, case study location, and the process and timeframe of data collection. Such detailed descriptions, argued Shenton (2004) allow the reader to draw their own conclusions regarding the likelihood of transferability to situations with which they are familiar. As stated in Chapter 3, Shenton described the strategy of providing a detailed description of the context of the study as necessary to assuring that readers can draw their own conclusions regarding whether or not the study will transfer to situations with which they are familiar.

Research Findings

In this section, I provide a detailed description of the research findings. This includes data analysis for each of the four a priori themes that emerged from the literature review and from the single meta-theme that emerged from participant interviews. I will use direct quotes from the participant interviews to provide evidence of the participants' perceptions of how local-level leaders impacted the successful adoption of the ESP.

Theme 1: Formal Leaders as Policy Champions

The first a priori theme, formal leaders as champions, included a compilation of the following codes: communicating the importance of the policy, celebrating success, sharing workload, consistent focus on education, supervisor's modeling, and identified subject matter expert (SME). The crux of this theme is that there were specific actions taken by local-level leaders that gave case managers the perceptions that the ESP was an important policy being championed by leadership. The direct quotes highlighted in the

following section provide evidence of participant perspectives as well as insight into the specific actions of leaders as policy champions.

Anne. Anne conveyed her appreciation for her supervisor who "was definitely instrumental in ensuring that we got these (referrals) done so much so that she would…do the actual referrals, if we were consumed with other tasks." Anne made several references to the support and attention provided by supervisors in the form of sharing the workload, celebrating success, and identification of an SME. She also praised leadership for their focus on education. Anne's interview responses captured several subthemes embodied in the theme of local leaders serving as champions of the ESP. She indicated that her direct supervisor actively championed the ESP by identifying an agency leader as the subject matter expert who provided training needed for successfully implementing the ESP. When asked to expound on the role of the SME, Anne responded: "She didn't just give us the information, she ensured that we understood. And it wasn't just a 'one and done' situation. My supervisor made sure that we had access to her for any follow up questions or challenges." When prodded to provide more information regarding what actions leaders took to champion the ESP, Anne responded that there were "meetings…weekly reminders, and progress updates sent to us to let us know where we were individually and as a unit." She added that "education was an agenda item for just about every meeting" and that supervisors "celebrated our progress."

Barbara. Barbara also gave high praise to county leadership for identifying the SME who she considered a leader and policy champion. When asked what actions the SME took to champion the ESP, Barbara stated that the SME "gave us real life scenarios

about horrible things that were happening to foster children in the educational system."

Comments from Barbara's interview highlighted several subthemes which supported the leaders as champions of the ESP. She reflected that "leadership from the county director all the way down were constantly reminding us to do the referrals for every kid in care" which she felt was an indication of the importance of the ESP. She also echoed Anne's perception that education was a "standard part of every meeting" and that leaders would regularly "send out progress updates to let us know which kids hadn't been referred." Barbara inferred that these actions taken by leadership emphasized the importance of compliance with the ESP. Barbara also identified celebrating success as an important indicator that the ESP was championed by local-level leaders, stating that "celebrations don't come often in this line of business…so my leadership takes every opportunity to celebrate every success."

Candace. Candace offered that her supervisor and the county director were "gung-ho about education." She provided examples of the SME being a policy champion by providing training, sharing the workload, and consistently "sharing her knowledge" in a way that was motivating. Candace made mention of leadership "sharing academic success stories" as evidence of their continued focus on education and their commitment to celebrating success. She described her supervisor as a champion of the ESP because she was "really excited about what the education policy would mean for our kids." Candace suggested that her supervisor's excitement was motivating and an indication that the ESP was important.

Danielle. Danielle echoed the sentiments of Barbara with regards to the role of formal leaders as policy champions. Like Barbara, Danielle spoke positively of the SME as being a policy champion. Danielle offered her perspective of how leaders celebrated success when she relayed the story of the county leading the state with the graduation of 93% of the high school seniors in custody:

> Leadership made a big deal about it and I personally felt really good about that because one of the graduates was on my caseload and I had put supports in place through the ESP to help him pass his senior math class, which he needed to graduate. It felt really good that our kids were graduating and that leadership acknowledged our role in that accomplishment.

When asked if there were other actions taken by local-level leaders to champion the ESP, Danielle indicated that "leaders made it clear that submitting referrals was a priority. Education was discussed at every meeting and if a child had not been referred, then the case manager would get a reminder." She went on to describe her supervisor as "consistent" with "her focus on education" and confided that she was "moved by her passion." Danielle used a story to relate her experience with leadership communication of the importance of the ESP by continually focusing on education. She also made several remarks about the SME, celebrating success, and being motivated by leaderships' passion.

Erika. Erika had been with the agency for the least length of time so she could not give input about specific actions that formal leaders may have taken to champion the ESP during the implementation phase, however, her insight as to how they were currently

serving as champions was valuable. Erica clearly saw her supervisor as a policy champion. She talked about how her supervisor "used daily conversations to let us know that ESP was important" and how she "made a big deal about academic successes."

For Erika, champions of the ESP are not only found in positions of leadership, they could also be found among her colleagues. She provided an interesting perspective on policy champions when she spoke about a colleague who serves as a mentor to her. Erika described her colleague as a "policy champion because she took the time to walk me through the referral process until I was able to submit referrals on my own." Erika added that her colleague was "part of the original team that came up with the ESP implementation plan" and that she "is the person I go to for guidance about challenges my kids are facing in school."

Overall, participants saw their county level leadership as champions of the ESP, and they reported being motivated by the enthusiasm and passion of their leaders. It was apparent that leadership took an active role in the promoting the implementation of the ESP by remaining focused on education, identifying a SME, working alongside case managers, and celebrating success along the way. Some of the most frequently mentioned leadership actions reported by all participants included leaders initiating formal and informal discussions around the importance of the ESP; including education progress updates as a standard agenda item for every meeting; and, exuding a passion about the promise of the ESP. Leaders were also seen as champions who motivated case managers by focusing on the human element of the ESP. Relaying academic success stories as well as sharing real life examples of the academic challenges faced by children

in care served as a constant reminder that policy compliance had human implications. The consistent and emotional engagement of leaders was a concept that stood out for me while listening to participants explain how they were moved by the passion of their leaders. My bracketed thoughts included the possibility of a connection between the passion of the leaders and the motivation of the case managers to do their part to adopt the ESP.

Theme 2: Intentional Inclusion of Informal Leaders as Policy Champions

The second a priori theme, intentional inclusion of informal leaders as policy champions, included the following coded data: seeing results, trusting co-workers, feedback loops, and opportunities for frontline input. Direct quotes from the participants provide evidence of their perspectives of the specific actions taken by leadership to positively impact the adoption of the ESP by including informal policy champions during the implementation phase.

Anne. Anne was vocal in her characterization of certain peers as informal policy champions. She specifically characterized another participant as an informal policy champion. When asked to elaborate on any specific ways that her peer championed the ESP, Anne recalled:

> (She) was definitely an advocate, or champion, of the ESP. She was the first case manager to talk to me about the policy and she was passionate about it…(she) was on some team that put a plan together about how to roll out the policy in our county…(she) was really involved in making sure other case managers didn't feel overwhelmed with more duties.

Barbara. Barbara acknowledged being invited by leadership to join the ESP implementation team and conveyed that the team was set up by county leadership and was meant to include people from the front lines. "It didn't matter what position or unit you were in, he (county director) just wanted staff from all levels to come together to figure out a way to introduce the policy to the county in a meaningful way." Barbara added that being included on that team made her feel as though "that was a chance for my voice to be heard, but more importantly, to speak up on behalf of my coworkers who were already drowning in work."

Barbara's response prompted me to delve deeper into her perceptions of the role of leadership with regards to the inclusion of informal leaders. She stated that leadership was "passionate" about the new policy and included frontline staff in discussions about "what it (ESP) would mean for the children served in the county." Their passion compelled Barbara to "talk to my co-workers about the policy and how it could help our kids." Barbara conveyed that leadership encouraged frontline staff to "work with leadership to identify challenges and resolutions" to the roll out of the ESP. Barbara's participation on the implementation team gave her the opportunity to "let leadership know how case managers were feeling" and to "get feedback from case managers" about how best to incorporate the policy into their daily work. She applauded leadership for "creating a diverse team" to plan for the roll out and for "really listening to what we had to say." Barbara made several references to feedback loops created by leadership to ensure that the voices of case managers were heard. She alluded to the trust built

between co-workers as a result of those feedback loops and to the trust in leadership as a result of their creation of this team.

Candace. Candace also mentioned leaderships' creation of the implementation team as a successful strategy to "create buy in." Leadership's intentional inclusion of frontline staff on the implementation team was an indication to Candace that "leadership understood what was already on our plates and…asked for our opinions about how to make this policy work." She added that including frontline staff gave others the feeling that "the county director was going to hear our concerns and our ideas- and he did." When prompted to provide examples of how the county director heard the concerns and ideas of case managers, Candace recalled leaderships' creation of the "30-day case manager." The idea of this position, she stated "came from a case manager who suggested that leadership designate one person to complete all referrals within the timeframe outlined in the ESP." Candace went on to say that leaderships' creation of this position "was a real morale boost for our unit" because it "made us feel like our opinions mattered."

Candace gave the example of leaders including frontline staff in the creation of a plan to implement the ESP. She offered that leaders listened to and implemented the ideas of frontline staff by creating the 30-day case manager. From Candace's perspective, leaderships' creation of opportunities for frontline input resulted in improved communication and an increase in morale.

Danielle. Having been at the agency for only 2 years, Danielle was not aware of the planning team or the inclusion of informal policy champions in the roll out of ESP.

She did have a perspective on informal leaders in the organization who contributed to the ongoing success of the ESP. Danielle stated that there are "mentors" in her unit that she can rely upon when she doesn't "understand the policy." These trusted co-workers are not in official leadership positions, but "they work with leadership to try to find ways to solve the problem so we can do our jobs." Danielle conveyed that these trusted co-workers regularly "meet with leadership" and that "leadership respects what they have to say."

Erika. Like Danielle, Erika was unaware of how the policy was implemented. Having only been with the agency for 14 months at the time of interview, Erika reported that the practice of referring children to the Education Unit per the ESP "is just what we do. It's a normal part of our duties." Erika's response indicated the routinization of the ESP, which will be discussed further in the Interpretation of Findings and Diffusion of Innovation section.

The comments coded to this theme indicate that local-level leaders took specific actions to include case managers in the implementation of the ESP within their county. Leaderships' creation of a multi-level team dedicated to planning the implementation of the ESP was identified as significant by three of the five participants. Participants' enthusiastic description of this team led me to note the "genuine appreciation" they had for leaderships' efforts to include them in the decision-making process.

Participants also expressed the importance of feeling they were being heard by leadership. They expressed approval of the way leaders' intentionally sought feedback from case managers to solve ESP related implementation challenges. The creation of

feedback loops gave case managers the feeling that their voices had been heard and that their opinions mattered. Whether directly or indirectly stated, it was apparent to me that participants felt as though they were a part of the decision-making process. My bracketed thoughts can best be described as feelings of encouragement regarding the open communication between leadership and frontline staff. I surmised that there was a connection between leaderships' inclusion of frontline staff and high morale. Leaderships' excitement about the anticipated results of implementing the ESP and their intentional inclusion of frontline staff in the decision-making process were influential in creating buy-in from those on the front lines.

Theme 3: Leaders as Resource Allocators

The third a priori theme, leaders as resource allocators, included the following codes: providing initial and ongoing training, staff resources, and protected time. The essence of this theme is that leaders allocated specific resources that impacted the successful adoption of the ESP. A deeper exploration of participant perspectives relative to resources allocated by leadership to impact the adoption of the ESP is provided in this section.

Anne. Anne considered training to be a "really important" resource allocated by leadership. She spoke of "education academies" that were 'unique" in that case managers "learned and understood *why* the policy was so important." She elaborated that "the training gave us an understanding of how important school is from a child's perspective so the referral was no longer just a piece of paper." Anne made clear that the quality of the training was important to creating case manager buy in. Anne's focus on leaderships'

allocation of training opportunities was an indication of the impact that training had on her compliance with the ESP. From her perspective, the training was key to her compliance with the provisions of the ESP.

Barbara. When asked about the allocation of resources related to the successful adoption of the ESP, Barbara immediately began to explain the "30-day case manager" previously described by Candace. Barbara described the allocation of that additional position as a "great example of a resource provided by leadership." She went on to explain that the position "really takes a load off the case manager."

Barbara also shared Anne's perspective on the importance of training. She spoke specifically about her supervisor. She indicated that her supervisor set up multiple training sessions, and that the training reinforced her "understanding of the reason why children were referred to the Education Unit." When asked to elaborate on any other resources allocated by leadership, Barbara added that leadership had "included ESP training and school stability training in the new case manager training and every new case manager is given a binder of resources to assist with common school related issues." To her, this was an indication "that the ESP wasn't going away" and that "it was important to leadership because it's important to kids." Barbara's focus on training and the addition of human resources to assist with referrals indicated that she sees leaderships' allocation of these two resources as significant in the successful adoption of the ESP in her county.

Candace. Candace highlighted initial and ongoing training as "critical" to the successful adoption of this policy. Candace spoke with enthusiasm about the education academies stating that "training helped me to feel more confident in advocating" for

foster children. In addition to the training provided by leadership, Candace gave the example of added human resources, and echoed her colleagues' perception of the 30-day case manager stating that:

> When they added this position, I knew that they were serious about the ESP. This wasn't just another policy that would go away in 6 months. This was important and they were giving us the resources to make sure that we were in compliance.

Candace also introduced a resource I hadn't heard mentioned before: "protected time." She explained it as, "time when your supervisor knows you're working on something important and that you shouldn't be interrupted." Candace stated that her supervisor allowed protected time to "work on updating the education detail page for all of our kids" which is a requirement of the ESP. For Candace, the allocation of resources was an indication that adoption of the ESP was important. From her perspective, leadership sent a clear message that the ESP was permanent.

Danielle. Like her colleagues, Danielle described "training" as the biggest resource provided by leadership but offered that her supervisor was also a resource. When asked to elaborate, Danielle offered that her supervisor "sets up one on one meetings," "brainstorms solutions to education problems," and "offers protected time to work on educational issues." From Danielle's perspective her supervisor served as a resource by remaining accessible and engaged in the daily activities related to ESP compliance.

Erika. Erika also emphasized the importance of training. She described it as a "resource" that helped "understand the importance of the ESP." In addition to the initial

training she received when starting as a case manager, Erika described the ongoing

training as "a great resource for me as a new case manager" and reported "feeling more

confident about advocating" as a result of the ongoing ESP training. Erika's emphasis on

training as a valuable resource caused me to bracket thoughts about leaders' "tendency to

discount the importance of resources" by "failing to invest" in initial and ongoing

resources. While my thoughts are an expression of my own experiences with policy

adoption, the responses from participants of this study rebuffed my perception.

Participants expressed that they were better equipped and more confident to carry

out their ESP related duties because of the resources allocated by leadership. Training

was clearly identified as an important resource allocated by leadership as were the

addition of human resources and the idea of protected time. It is important to note that the

quality of the training offered by leadership was also seen as significant in the adoption

of the ESP. Participants stated that while training addressed the requirements of the

policy, it was the passionate delivery of the training that instilled a sense of urgency

about the ESP. Participants also found that leaderships' allocation of initial and ongoing

resources was an indication of the importance of the ESP as compared to past policies

that had been short-lived due to a lack of resources during implementation.

Theme 4: Leaders and Organizational Climate

The fourth meta-theme, leaders and organizational climate, included the following

coded categories: departmental pride, co-worker support, supervisor support, support

from other units, foster parent inclusion, and motivation. The essence of this theme was

that the actions of leaders influenced the climate of the organization. A discussion of

participant perspectives on actions taken by leaders to positively impact organizational climate is provided in this section.

Anne. Anne described her unit as "close-knit." She indicated that a lot of support came from her coworkers, the foster parents, and from leadership. "When any one of us falls behind, we tend to all chip-in to get the work done. It's just a given that we'll support one another… and my supervisor sets the tone." I asked Anne to describe how it felt to work for such a supervisor, and she offered that "it doesn't feel like I work *for* her at all. It feels like I work *with* her…she's fighting alongside us to make sure their (children's) needs are met." Anne also conveyed that her supervisor contributes to the sense of pride throughout her unit. Anne's remark about feeling supported by foster parents was interesting to me so I asked that she elaborate. She relayed that "leadership has created opportunities for foster parents to attend trainings to prepare for that (education advocate) role" which she stated, created an "inclusive and supportive environment" for everyone involved in caring for the child.

Anne's responses indicated that she feels supported by her supervisor, foster parents, and co-workers. She indicated that she feels a camaraderie or sense of pride in her department and she stated that her supervisor contributes to the sense of pride by "setting a tone of cooperation" throughout the unit, with leadership, and with foster parents.

Barbara. Barbara also made references to the support of co-workers and supervisors. When asked about her perception of efforts by leadership to create a climate of sustained compliance with the ESP, Barbara responded that "we took an all hands-on

deck approach to education." She echoed Anne's comments on the inclusion of foster parents and added that county leadership "always tried to include foster parents in our approach to problem solving. Not just with education, but with everything related to the child." Barbara felt certain that "leadership's focus on children helped to create a climate where *everyone* focused on children." Her description of support from co-workers, supervisors, and foster parents indicated that Barbara saw the importance of such a team - oriented approach to meeting the compliance expectations of the ESP.

      Candace. When asked about leaderships' influence on organizational climate, Candace responded that "our leaders set the tone…they walk the walk and expect us to do the same." Candace offered that the climate had not always been supportive: "the climate of our county wasn't always so supportive but it always came from the top. I think subtle changes in leadership resulted in big changes in climate." Candace conspicuously avoided talking about past leadership and instead focused on the present. She specifically stated, "Our current leadership is really involved in setting the tone for how we interact with one another and with our foster parents." With regards to the adoption of the ESP, she added that there's a "sense of mutual respect that motivates us to want to do the right thing…to go above and beyond what's expected so that we continue to meet or exceed expectations."

      Candace went on to describe a sense of "pride" in her unit. She stated that "leadership pushes a spirit of competition by sharing quarterly reports that show where we are in relation to other counties across the state… and celebrating our (unit's) success is always a help." Candace alluded to the fact that she had experienced an unsupportive

work environment in the past which makes her "appreciate the support of supervisors and co-workers" in her current environment.

Danielle. Danielle made reference to departmental pride as well. When asked why case managers respond so well to getting referrals in on time, she stated that she believes that others feel "supported by leadership and peers since day one on the job." Danielle referred to herself as a "team player" and stated that she is "motivated" by the "support of leadership and co-workers." Danielle contrasted the climate of her current workplace to that of places she's worked in the past. She noted the difference, stating that "I can be open and honest with my leadership…I'll be heard and respected." Danielle stated that the climate is such that she is "not afraid to admit what I don't know or when I need support. I know for sure I can count on my supervisor."

Danielle is proud to be a part of her unit. She feels connected to the unit and she is motivated by the support of co-workers, leadership, and other departments. Her responses are an indication that she feels comfortable engaging with leadership and that she enjoys the sense of departmental pride that she has experienced since joining this unit. This sense of pride is motivation for Danielle as it pushes her to do her part to assist the unit in meeting goals.

Erika. Erika shared a perspective similar to Danielle in that she too felt as though she "walked into a climate of support and respect" when she joined this county office 14 months ago. When asked what role, if any, leadership played in that climate, she echoed her colleagues' responses that leaders "model the expectation that we're supportive of one another." Erika also provided a unique perspective that "everyone in the county has

a responsibility for the climate" and added that "there are plenty of people who are not in leadership positions that have a positive impact on our climate." Erika's response reinforced the perception that leadership set the tone for a climate conducive to the successful implementation of the ESP. From her perspective, county level staff adopted the tone set by leadership by supporting one another.

Overall, participants indicated that the most prominent actions taken by leaders to positively impact the climate of the county were a willingness to work alongside case managers and the creation of a supportive and inclusive environment where members felt respected and valued. Participants reported feeling empowered to ask for help when needed and they indicated a deep allegiance to one another within their unit. My own bracketed thoughts around leaders and organizational climate were consistent with the perceptions of participants, although there was a sharp contrast between my own experiences of organizational climate and the organizational climate experienced by the participants. In my own experience, organizational climate had been oppressive. Prior to beginning the interview process, I had bracketed my own thoughts of distrust of leaders and fear of retaliation for honest communication. The contrast between my personal experience and that of the participants is noteworthy and lends credence to the connection between positive climate and successful policy implementation. In my personal experience, policy was not well received by frontline staff which resulted in failed implementation of the ESP. In the county under study, supervisors modeled expectations around the timely submission of Education Unit referrals by lending a hand to meet deadlines established in the ESP. The county leaders were visible and available to case

managers. The participants' comments revealed that the leaders set the standard for how the entire department worked and resulted in a supportive team approach to implementing the requirements set out in the ESP.

Theme 5: Connection Between Policy and Practice

The fifth meta-theme is the only one that emerged from the data collected during participant interviews. This meta-theme, connection between policy and practice, includes the following codes: understanding the importance of policy, increased confidence, education success stories, and increased graduation rate. In this section, I present direct quotes from participants to provide evidence of the importance of leadership efforts to make the connection between policy and practice.

Anne. Anne was enthusiastic about leaderships' role in providing training that resulted in her "understanding of the connection between submitting an Education Unit referral and education stability." She made several references to "understanding the *why*" and credited leadership with "taking the time to incorporate discussions on the importance of education at every opportunity." When asked to elaborate on her use of the term "understanding the why," Anne offered that "what started out as just another thing on our 'to do list' became something that we all know would result in better academic outcomes for our kids." She elaborated that leadership helped to make that connection by "having real conversations about real kids...the success stories gave us that push to put the policy into practice by doing a referral" and stated that "everyone bought into the why…we were on board with the policy and leadership played a big part in that buy in." Anne's responses made it clear that leadership made an effort to create a real

connection between the policy and practice. Anne aptly described that connection as "understanding the why."

Barbara. Barbara was also of the opinion that leadership played a role in highlighting the connection between policy and practice. She referred to this connection as "the point behind the policy" and mentioned "real life scenario problem" discussions as the catalyst for staff buy-in. Barbara stated that "the ESP really came to life during these kinds of conversations because the problems we were discussing reinforced the importance of the resources made available to us through the ESP." Barbara went on to relay the fact that in 2017, her county had the highest graduation rate in the state.

> That was huge. When leadership made the announcement that 93% of our seniors had graduated that year we were really proud…and I know that every one of those kids was referred to the Education Unit… and there were a few that might not have graduated if we hadn't made the referral so that was another example to us about the connection between the policy and the practice of focusing on education.

Success stories of children who had been referred to the Education Unit helped Barbara to see the connection between policy and practice. Barbara saw leaderships' continued efforts to share such stories when brainstorming solutions to current educational challenges as an indication that compliance with the ESP is important to the educational stability of foster children in her county. From her perspective, the connection between policy and practice motivated case managers to submit referrals as outlined in the ESP.

Candace. Candace offered that children on her caseload "are doing better in school, now…they've shown improvement in behavior and grades" and that she's "looking forward to one graduating in May." The academic success of children on her caseload has helped Candace to make the connection between policy and practice. Because Candace has made that connection, she "encourages new case managers to learn all they can about the ESP" so that "they can see the benefits of the ESP firsthand" with the children on their caseloads.

Candace's perspective provided insight to the connection between the ESP and the academic outcomes of foster children. Making that connection motivated Candace to continue efforts to comply with the ESP. In addition, Candace's own positive experience with the ESP resulted in her adopting the practice of encouraging new case managers to take advantage of the supports offered through the ESP.

Danielle. Danielle immediately reiterated her sense of pride at having played a role in the graduation of one of her foster youth calling it a "defining moment" in her understanding of the importance of the ESP. Danielle went on to say that for her, "understanding why we're required to do something is critical to me. I need to know how a policy will benefit my kids." Danielle's need to have a practical understanding of the policy was satisfied by her own personal experience with the policy and resulted in a clear connection between policy and practice. Her focus on how the policy would positively impact the children on her caseload is an indication that Danielle made the connection between policy and practice.

Erika. Erika mentioned discussions of educational success stories as being instrumental in helping her to understand the importance of the ESP. She shared a story of a foster child facing "significant academic challenges" and asserted that he overcame those challenges because she referred him to the Education Unit where he was connected to "the supports he needed to be promoted to the fourth grade." Erika explained her supervisor's role in that understanding. She stated that her "supervisor could have given him to someone more experienced, but she assigned him to me and she walked me through the entire process." Erika stated that the guidance from her supervisor made her "feel more confident in working with the school to make sure his needs were being met… she didn't just talk about the ESP, she actually walked me through the process."

Erika's responses indicate that supervisors can assist in making the connection between policy and practice by being actively engaged with staff as they navigate the policy in real time. Her responses also underscored the positive impact that success stories have on the connection between policy and practice. Erika's ability to understand the connection between policy and practice was enhanced by her supervisor's insistence that she take on a difficult case. This resulted in an increase in confidence about her ability to put the policy into practice.

Overall, participants reported needing to understand *why* the policy was important. They needed to see how it would better the lives of the children on their caseloads. Either through personal experience or through leaderships' frequent and public sharing of education success stories that highlighted the benefits of the ESP, participants reported that understanding "the why" was a motivation to submit Education

Unit referrals as required by the ESP. My bracketed thoughts aligned with the

perspectives of the participants. One bracketed thought in particular captured my

thoughts about the frustration felt by my former co-workers and I when a new policy was

introduced with no rationale provided for how this might impact foster children. That

thought was followed by documentation of my feeling "encouraged" by responses from

participants indicating that they were appreciative of the intentional acts by leadership to

assist them in making the connection between policy and practice. Assisting case

managers in understanding why the policy is important was identified by all 5

participants as the most important action taken by leadership to impact the successful

adoption of the ESP.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of case managers

regarding the impact of local-level leaders on the adoption of education policy in a child

welfare agency. In this chapter I began with a description of challenges and resulting

revisions to the study that were previously presented in Chapter 3. This was followed by

a detailed description of the pilot study procedures, study setting, and demographics.

Next, I provided a detailed description of the data collection procedures so as to increase

the transferability of the study. In the data analysis section I provided the results of my

analysis of the data using Colaizzi's (1978) seven step data analysis process. This

process resulted in the assignment of codes to the four a priori themes identified in the

literature as well as codes assigned to a meta-theme that emerged from the semistructured

interviews. The data analysis section was followed by a discussion of the evidence of

trustworthiness. Finally, I presented my findings. In that section, I included thick description and direct quotes from participant interviews that provided evidence of participant perspectives on the sole research question: How do local-level leaders impact the adoption of education policy in a child welfare agency? In Chapter 5, I will offer my interpretation of the research findings and I will discuss the possible implications for social change, as well as the study's limitations and my recommendations for further research.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of frontline staff regarding the impact of local-level leadership on the implementation of an innovative education policy in one CWA. The role of leaders as it relates to policy adoption has been widely covered by authors such as Aarons et al. (2016), Claiborne et al. (2013), and Lambert et al. (2016). Several researchers have suggested that frontline staff have a direct influence on policy implementation and have called for further research to determine how leaders include such staff in the implementation of innovative policy (Aarons et al., 2016; Akins, 2016; Kaye et al., 2012).

The key findings from this research revealed that there were specific actions taken by local-level leaders to positively impact the successful adoption of an innovative educational policy in one county office of a child welfare agency. Those actions were categorized in five separate metathemes that emerged from the literature review and from participant interviews: formal leaders as policy champions; intentional inclusion of informal leaders as policy champions; leaders as resource allocators; leaders and organizational climate; and connection between policy and practice.

In this chapter, I provide my interpretation of the research findings based on the previously mentioned themes. This chapter also includes discussion of the findings relative to the conceptual framework. The interpretation of findings is followed by a summary of the conclusion to the research question: How did local-level leaders impact the adoption of education policy in a child welfare agency? The chapter ends with a

discussion of the study limitations, my recommendations for further study, implications

for social change, and my final conclusion.

Interpretation of Findings Relevant to the Literature

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the actions taken by local-

level leaders to impact the adoption of innovative education policy in one state CWA. A

review of the literature revealed four a priori themes: formal leaders as policy champions,

intentional inclusion of informal leaders as policy champions, leaders as resource

allocators, and leaders and organizational climate. The findings of this study expand

upon previous research through the identification of specific leadership *actions* taken

within those four themes. In addition to the identification of specific actions taken by

leaders, the findings from this research contribute to the literature with the identification

of a fifth theme: making the connection between policy and practice.

Formal Leaders as Policy Champions

Rogers (1995) described the policy champion as an individual who promotes and

solicits support for the adoption of policy through action and dialogue with others

throughout an organization. This description was echoed by Moreland-Russell and

Carothers (2015), who stressed the importance of having multiple policy champions in

leadership roles. Willging et al. (2015) added that the presence of local-level leaders as

policy champions was essential in the successful adoption of policy in a government

agency. Findings from this study revealed that participants viewed local-level leaders as

policy champions. Participants provided specific examples of actions taken by leaders to

promote the adoption of the ESP. Such actions included leaders remaining focused on

the policy through ongoing engagement and dialogue with staff at all levels. Participants

reported that leaders consistently included policy discussion as an agenda item in every

meeting and that they kept case managers aware of monthly progress toward full

compliance with the policy. These findings support findings in the literature that have

revealed that leaders can serve as policy champions through consistent focus on the

policy and frequent communication with frontline staff regarding progress toward full

adoption of the policy.

Akin et al. (2016) and Lambert et al. (2016) found that leaders served as policy

champions by modeling expectations and by remaining engaged in the implementation

process. Enz (2012) offered a different view, holding that the inherent power associated

with a leadership position is more impactful than the notion of leaders as policy

champions. He went on to suggest that frontline staff will follow the direction of a leader

simply because that is what is expected. Participants in this study noted that they were

motivated to comply with the ESP because their supervisors modeled the desired

behavior by actually *assisting* with the referral process or by accompanying them to

Individual Education Program (IEP) meetings or tribunals as a support. Participants

added that their supervisors were "excited" about the policy and that despite having to do

"more work on the front end," staff were motivated by leadership's excitement. Findings

from this research refute the findings of Enz and support the findings of Akin et al. and

Lambert et al. with regard to leaders as policy champions.

Celebrating success was a leadership action that was not identified in the literature

but that was frequently identified by participants during the interview process.

Specifically, participants cited the importance of leaders sharing "real life examples" that provided evidence of positive academic outcomes when case managers had used the resources available through the ESP. Leadership's acknowledgement of a job well done motivated participants to continue to connect children on their caseloads to the resources available through the ESP. Enz (2012) suggested that staff are motivated to adopt policy through the allocation of rewards, but the findings of this study indicate that leadership acknowledgement provided that motivation. In addition, participants reported feeling motivated by leaders who instilled a sense of competition by regularly celebrating progress reports that highlighted the county's referral rate as compared to other counties across the state. Instilling competition as a means to motivate staff to comply with the policy was not a leadership action found in the literature. The findings of this study expand the literature as they provide additional evidence of actions taken by leaders as policy champions.

The identification of an SME was also cited as an action taken by leaders as policy champions. This action was referenced by all five participants and was second to leaders acting as policy champions by providing a consistent focus on the policy. By identifying an SME, leaders provided case managers with opportunities for initial and ongoing training and coaching from someone other than local-level leadership. Participants reported that the SME was "always available" when leadership was not and was "happy to share her knowledge." This individual served as an extension of leadership and motivated staff to understand the importance of the policy. By identifying an SME, leadership reinforced the understanding that the policy was important and

necessary. The identification of an SME was not found in the literature review and therefore extends knowledge of actions that leaders can take to impact the successful adoption of policy.

Intentional Inclusion of Informal Leaders as Policy Champions

Rogers (1995) described the informal leader as one who, regardless of position or title, has a unique influence over peers. The findings from the literature revealed that the informal leader can often be found in the lower levels of the organizational hierarchy and that such a leader is critical to the successful adoption of innovative policy (Armstrong et al., 2014; Lambert et al., 2016, Rogers, 1995). Willging et al. (2015) concluded that the intentional creation of opportunities for frontline input when planning how to implement policy is critical to the successful adoption of policy. Spath et al. (2013) echoed that conclusion and strongly encouraged child welfare leaders to intentionally include informal leaders found on the front lines in the decision-making process. Even Enz (2012), who found formal leaders as policy champions to be less effective than formal leaders who relied upon their power and authority, agreed that leadership's intentional creation of a taskforce composed of members from all levels was of paramount importance to the successful implementation of policy.

The findings of this study support the literature as the opportunity for frontline input was identified by four of the five participants as an action taken by leadership that impacted the successful adoption of the ESP. Specifically, participants cited leadership's request for volunteers to serve on a policy implementation team as indicative of the importance of the ESP. Participants conveyed that the individuals identified were

informal frontline leaders. They agreed that having these trusted coworkers on the implementation team gave them a sense of confidence that their voices would be accurately represented as they spoke on their behalf.

Findings from the literature also indicate that the inclusion of informal leaders in the creation of feedback loops between leadership and frontline staff is critical to the successful adoption of policy, specifically in a child welfare agency (Akin, 2016; Armstrong et al., 2014). Claiborne et al. (2013) found that policy adoption is greatly impacted when leaders intentionally include frontline staff in the creation of two-way communication systems. The findings of this study support the literature and provide information on specific actions taken by leaders to increase communication between leadership and frontline staff. In this study, participant responses revealed that leadership intentionally created formal and informal feedback loops. Participants indicated that by including informal leaders on the implementation team, leadership created an opportunity for case managers to convey concerns about the ESP. The most common concern was the addition of work to their already heavy workloads. Participants reported that they saw evidence of leadership's consideration of their concerns in the final implementation plan, which included resources to assist them in managing added duties related to the ESP. Participants expressed appreciation for leadership's intentional inclusion of informal leaders as policy champions, which resulted in the opportunity for frontline input with regard to how the ESP would be implemented and in the creation of feedback loops. These findings support the literature regarding the importance of the intentional inclusion of informal leaders as policy champions.

Leaders as Resource Allocators

Lambert et al. (2016) and Aarons et al. (2014) stressed the importance of leadership's allocation of resources in the successful adoption of policy. Findings from both studies made mention of resources such as initial and ongoing training, staff, and time. The findings of this research support the literature, beginning with the allocation of training resources.

All participants in this study cited allocation of training resources as an example of an action taken by leadership to impact the successful adoption of the ESP. All five interviews provided data on the importance of leaders allocating initial and ongoing training on the ESP. Participants expressed satisfaction with the amount of training they received relative to the implementation of the ESP. Participants reported that the trainings were led by supervisors or the SME, and that they continued to receive training on a regular basis. In addition to the frequency of training, participants remarked on the passion and enthusiasm of the trainers. Participants reported feeling motivated by an emotional connection to the training. While there was no mention of *meaningful* training in the literature, the participants' responses about leadership's allocation of training resources support the findings from the literature.

The allocation of staff resources was cited as an important action taken by leadership to impact the adoption of policy (Aarons et al., 2014; Lambert et al., 2016; Spath et al., 2013). The present study supports the literature in that four of the five participants mentioned the importance of leaders allocating additional staff resources. Specifically, participants expressed appreciation for the allocation of human resources to

assist with the submission of referrals. Participants' responses revealed their perceptions that the addition of the 30-day case manager was an indication that leaders were serious about adoption of the ESP and that the policy was important. Participant responses also revealed the perception that the addition of human resources to assist with ESP implementation was a direct result of their voices being heard by the implementation team. This perception supports the findings of Green et al. (2016), who encouraged leaders to create opportunities for frontline staff to have a say in *how* resources are allocated.

Allocation of *leaders' time* was also identified as a specific resource that facilitated the implementation of the ESP. Participants in this study revealed that leaders allocated their time by scheduling one-on-one meetings, holding group brainstorming sessions, and remaining accessible and engaged. This finding was consistent with research by Aarons et al. (2014) and Lambert et al. (2016), who found that leaders who set aside time to be available to their staff and who remained visibly connected to the policy by taking time to participate in training with staff had a positive impact on the adoption of policy.

Limiting or balancing competing priorities was an additional example of the allocation of time as a resource presented by Lambert et al. (2016). The authors found that frontline staff responded well to additional mandates outlined in new policy when they were provided leadership support in terms of balancing competing priorities. In the current study, *protected time* was identified by participants as an important resource allocated by leadership. Participants described this resource as the leadership-authorized

flexibility to set aside time to work solely on ESP-related tasks. This action taken by leaders to approve and honor protected time supports the existing knowledge of actions taken by leaders to positively impact the adoption of policy.

Leaders and Organizational Climate

There is a large body of literature regarding the positive correlation between leaders, organizational climate, and the successful adoption of policy (Aarons et al., 2014; Aarons & Sommerfeld, 2014; Akin et al., 2016; Lambert et al., 2016). Silver Wolf et al. (2014) concluded that organizational climate was a significant determinant of the successful implementation of policy. Organizational climate was ranked second to the allocation of resources in a study examining leadership factors that impacted policy adoption conducted by Lambert et al. (2016). Responses from participants in this study supported the findings of previous literature by providing examples of actions taken by leaders similar to those found in the literature review. One such action involved supervisors being highly visible, approachable, and willing to provide guidance as challenges arose. These actions are consistent with those cited by Akin et al. (2016), who encouraged leaders to lay the foundation for successful policy adoption by creating an organizational climate of open communication, ongoing coaching, and leadership support.

Findings from this study reveal one action taken by leaders to establish a climate conducive to the successful adoption of policy that was not found in the literature review. Participants reported that leaders intentionally created opportunities to include foster parents in the implementation of the ESP. Specifically, leaders created training

opportunities for foster parents to better equip them to be education advocates for the children in their care. Participants conveyed that by training foster parents on the ESP, leadership set the tone for a team-oriented climate conducive to full adoption of the ESP at all levels. The inclusion of foster parents in the implementation of the ESP is an example of an action taken by leadership that extends the knowledge of leaders and policy adoption in a child welfare agency.

Connection Between Policy and Practice

The final theme is one that emerged from the interviews and adds to the body of knowledge on leaders and policy adoption. The connection between policy and practice can best be described as the participants' need to understand the "why" or "point" behind the policy. Participants indicated that they were more apt to adopt the policy because they understood why it was being implemented and why it was important. Making the connection between policy and practice ranked highest along with formal leaders as policy champions. The high ranking of this theme is an indication of the significance of leadership actions taken to ensure that case managers were able to understand *why* the policy was important.

Common throughout the interviews was the reference to the impact that implementation of the ESP had on foster children. Participants described how leaders shared educational success stories relative to graduation and grade promotion to help case managers understand why the policy was important and how their compliance would impact foster children. Participants expressed that they were motivated to put the policy into practice because of the potential benefit to the children on their caseloads. This

response and subsequent motivation resulted in participants experiencing their own success stories relative to implementation of the ESP. Participants reported that those personal experiences deepened their understanding of the connection between policy and practice and resulted in an increased level of confidence in their ability to effectively implement the policy. Participants indicated that sharing success stories with one another became the catalyst for staff buy-in because all case managers wanted to assist in replicating that success for children on their caseloads. This was especially important to the case manager with the least experience, who was not able to make the connection until she herself experienced the academic success of one of the children whom she had referred to the Education Unit.

Leadership's initiation of brainstorming sessions was reported as another action taken by leaders to assist case managers in making the connection between policy and practice. Participants reported that the ESP "came to life" during such sessions because case managers were able to clearly see how the ESP could benefit the children on their caseloads. The strategy of creating opportunities for brainstorming and engaging case managers in solution focused dialogue adds to the knowledge of actions taken by leaders to positively impact the adoption of policy.

Interpretations of Findings and Diffusion of Innovation

Leaders acting as policy champions is a core principle in Rogers's (1995) DOI. Rogers held that leaders who actively champion policy through action, dialogue, and modeling, have a significant impact on the policy's successful adoption. The findings of this study support this theoretical finding and add specific actions taken by leaders that participants

found impactful. Participants revealed that leaders acted as policy champions by consistently communicating the importance of the policy, identifying and utilizing an SME to provide support, celebrating individual and unit successes, remaining focused on the policy during weekly meetings, and working alongside participants to model the expectations. Formal leaders as policy champions was found to be a significant contributor to the successful adoption of the ESP and therefore supports the theoretical findings.

In addition to those attributed to leaders as policy champions, county leaders utilized a variety of strategies to encourage the successful adoption of the ESP at the local level. Many of those strategies align with the elements found in Rogers's (1995) DOI: innovation, communication channels, time and social systems. In this study, I considered the role of leaders in the implementation of the innovation, the development of communication channels, and within social systems. The element of time was not a consideration in this research.

Innovation

Rogers (1995) argued that there are five "characteristics of innovation" (p. 15): trialability, relative advantage of the innovation, compatibility, complexity, and observability. The findings of this study support Rogers's assertion that innovations that are introduced on a trial basis are more likely to achieve full adoption. As described in the background section, the development of innovative practice around the education of foster children was first introduced as a pilot which, after 3 years, became a formal policy

of the agency. During the pilot phase, case managers were able to become familiar with the concept of educational stability and the services available to foster children.

Regarding the *relative advantage of the innovation*, findings from this study support Rogers's (1995) assertion that potential adopters weigh the benefits of implementation as they relate to their daily lives or work. It is important however, to make a distinction. Participants in this study did contemplate the advantages of the ESP in relation to their existing workload, but an additional, and perhaps more important consideration was the impact that ESP adoption would have on foster children. Participants reported feeling motivated to refer all children once they experienced how the ESP benefitted a child on their caseload.

With regards to the characteristic of *compatibility*, Rogers (1995) argued that potential adopters consider whether or not the innovation is compatible with the organization's existing norms and values. As discussed in Chapter 1, child welfare agencies are responsible for the safety, permanency, and wellbeing of children. The ESP is a wellbeing policy and is compatible with the norms and values of the state's CWA. As such, the findings of this research support Rogers's theory in the county under study.

The *complexity* of the ESP required case managers to have initial and ongoing training. Rogers (1995) concluded that innovations that are simple to understand are adopted faster than those that require adopters to acquire new skills. It is possible that the complexity of the ESP hindered the policy from being fully adopted across the state. Participants in this study, however, reported frequent, high quality training as an action taken by leaders to ensure that they were well-equipped to understand and implement the

policy. It cannot be determined whether this study supports or refutes Rogers's theory on complexity. The characteristic of *observability* of results, however, was supported by the findings of this study. Participant responses indicated that the sharing of success stories relative to the results of ESP implementation provided motivation to fully adopt the policy by referring all children to the Education Unit.

Communication

Rogers (1995) also cited communication channels as paramount to the successful adoption of policy. Results from this study revealed that agency leaders intentionally took actions to develop strong communication channels. One such action taken by leaders included an increase in the frequency of in person communication by maintaining the ESP as an agenda item in every meeting with frontline staff. Leaders also strengthened communication channels through the development of a policy implementation group. Leaders organizing this group intentionally selected policy champions from all levels of the organization to serve as liaisons between frontline staff and leadership. These actions taken by leaders to create intentional communication channels support Rogers's theory on the importance of communication. In addition, the selection of informal leaders to participate in this group provides further support of Rogers's assertion that policy champions can be found at all levels of the organizational structure.

Social Systems

The county office in which this study took place is by Rogers's (1995) definition a social system in that it is "a set of interrelated units that are engaged in joint problem-

solving to accomplish a common goal" (p. 23). Rogers suggested that innovations are more easily adopted in social systems with an established climate influenced by formal and informal leaders. The findings of this study support Rogers's suggestion. Participant responses indicate that formal and informal leaders took an active role in establishing a climate conducive to the adoption of innovative policy. By serving as policy champions, intentionally including frontline staff in the decision-making process, allocating resources, and remaining visibly connected to the work, leaders ensured that all staff in the county level social system remained focused on the common goal of full adoption of the ESP.

A final interpretation is made with reference to the DOI stages of implementation (Rogers, 1995). As discussed in Chapter 2, Rogers (1995) held that there are three stages in the implementation subprocess: redefining/restructuring, clarifying, and routinization. The routinization stage is described as the point that the innovation "becomes incorporated into the regular activities of the organization, and the innovation loses its separate identity" (p. 399). The routinization stage represents the final stage in the implementation process and is marked by the organization's successful adoption of the innovation. The findings from this study support that the county is approaching or has reached the routinization stage. In addition to the county having the second highest compliance rate in the agency, participants described ESP related duties as a "regular" part of their daily work. Participants also indicated that an introduction to the ESP is a formal part of new case manager training which is an indication that ESP related duties have become a normal part of case management in the county.

Limitations

Limitations for consideration include the homogeneity of the sample. All participants were White, educated, female, child welfare case managers who lived and worked in a small rural county in the state. This level of homogeneity may make this study difficult to transfer to other populations where samples may be more diverse. Additional limitations may include the mission of the government agency. Participants in the current study indicated that a passion for the mission was inherent in child welfare. This study may be difficult to replicate at an agency whose employees do not possess a passion for the mission.

An additional limitation is the absence of data from other sources. While the planned data collection included interviews with leaders and the review of agency documents, my resignation from the agency prior to the collection of data for the main study required a change in protocol. The inclusion of such data may have led to more detailed findings that included rich text and data from multiple sources.

Recommendations

The periodic introduction of new policy in a government agency is inevitable. In child welfare agencies, the benefits of innovative policy are often left unrealized due to problems with implementation (Lambert et al., 2016). There are three recommendations with regards to further study in the area of leaderships' impact on policy adoption in a child welfare agency. First, it is recommended that additional qualitative research be conducted to include interviews and the review of agency documentation such as meeting minutes and training logs, as originally planned for in the current study. The comparison

of data collected from agency documents and interviews may provide a fuller exploration of the actions taken by leaders to effectively impact the successful adoption of the ESP.

A second recommendation calls for further research using DOI as a framework to examine the element of time which was excluded from consideration in this study. Rogers (1995) described the element of time as the rate at which an innovative policy is adopted throughout a social system. While the element of time was not considered in the current study, it is recommended that additional quantitative research be conducted to examine and compare the rate at which two county offices adopt a policy and the correlation between leadership actions and the timeframe for adoption. Data collection might include the percentages of ESP related referrals in two counties over a 6 month period. Additional data collection might include the use of Likert scale surveys to capture participant perceptions of the extent to which leaders displayed actions outlined in the current study.

The third recommendation is for further study on the outcomes of the ESP as measured by cost of implementation and outcomes related to promotion, graduation, and the improvement of academic skill level of the state's foster children. Such a study might be quantitative or mixed methods. Data collection might include a review of promotion and graduation rates of youth receiving Education Unit services as compared to foster children nationwide. Interviews or surveys with foster children receiving Education Unit services might deepen the understanding of how educational supports provided through the ESP impact the academic outcomes of children in care. Such a study may advance decision-making with regards to budget and staffing allocations for the Education Unit.

Additional benefits might include a focus on the efficacy of the services offered to the vulnerable population served by the ESP.

Implications for Social Change

The findings of this qualitative case study have real implications for social change as they reinforce the assertion that actions taken by leaders have a direct impact on the successful adoption of innovative policy. From a general perspective, this finding is especially important to child welfare policies that directly impact our most vulnerable populations. It is feasible that the leadership actions identified in this study may be adopted by child welfare leaders as they implement future policy. Specifically, however, this study resulted in the identification of practical strategies that might be replicated across this state's CWA county offices to influence the adoption of the ESP. The full adoption of the ESP may result in the state's foster children gaining access to evidence-based educational interventions that may improve educational outcomes for this vulnerable population. Lastly, the implications of this study contribute to the theoretical perspective held by Rogers (1995) who supposed that leaders had a direct impact on the successful adoption of policy.

Conclusion

There is no shortage of research on the academic challenges faced by children in foster care (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014a; Cox, 2013; Zetlin & Weinberg, 2013). Likewise, literature abounds on the role of leaders on policy adoption (Aarons et al., 2016; Claiborne et al., 2013; Lambert et al., 2016). Research is limited, however, on the impact of leaders on policy adoption in child welfare agencies. Child welfare leaders are

in a precarious position with regards to policy implementation as the policies in this field have the potential to impact our most vulnerable populations. In addition, due to high rates of case manager burn-out, it is essential that child welfare leaders are sensitive to the current workloads of frontline staff when implementing new policy (Armstrong et al., 2014).

To increase the chances of successful policy adoption, it is imperative that child welfare leaders take a thoughtful approach to the implementation of innovative policy. As was found in this study, the feedback from those on the front lines is critical to this approach. When leaders seek input from frontline staff on the planning of policy implementation, and when they follow through on suggestions from those staff, they create a sense of inclusion that results in support for the policy. Additionally, leaders who actively champion the policy with passion and optimism provide motivation to those frontline staff responsible for carrying out the policy.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. A policy champion can be described as one who promotes the adoption of a policy by providing information about the policy and encouraging others to comply. Can you identify any policy champions in your workplace?

     a. If policy champions were identified, can you describe what they do to encourage policy adoption?

2. Describe your perception of the extent to which local-level agency leadership provides resources to assist with policy implementation.

     b. What examples can you give of resource allocation or lack thereof?

3. Describe your perception of how well front-line staff responded to submitting referrals to the Education Unit as required by the Education Stability Policy.

4. Describe how leadership may or may not have contributed to that response.

5. Describe any leadership efforts to sustain or improve the level of compliance with the Education Stability Policy.