Foster Pairing: A Community Centered Approach Foster Care

Comprehensive Exam

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ESSAY 1: CONTEXTUALIZATION

Introduction to Contextualization

Environment and surroundings matter and without acknowledging these elements,

implementation of programs will not succeed. According to Northwest University's International

Community Development master's program, the "practice of designing programs and processes

with attention to the particular cultural characteristics and inherent resources of a given people,

place and time", is known as contextualization, and it is necessary for developmental work

(Clark). As I researched the Washington State foster care system for my summer qualitative

fieldwork, I discovered how contextualization could be used to formulate an effective solution

that would address the current foster care crisis.

Through this essay, I will use the lens of the Foster Pairing program to discuss why

contextualization is necessary for cross-cultural work and describe how it can constructively lead

to social change. Engaging in community development involves different cultures, and as a

result, the lessons learned from my work with the foster care system can transcend to greater

social transformation contexts. Before proceeding, I would like to note that this essay targets the

audience of social change workers who hope to engage with others cross-culturally. As a result, I

am referencing the broader community of developmental workers when I say "we" must

incorporate elements of contextualization within our work.

By understanding the process of contextualization, recognizing the impact of this unique

approach, and identifying how it can be used to further transformative work, social change-

makers become more equipped to engage in the process of community development that respects

and cares for different cultures. Contextualization is crucial to system change. Social workers

who want to enhance their desired impacts while also valuing the communities they work with must understand this approach.

Foster Pairing

To explain the process of contextualization, I will reference the Foster Pairing program developed as a result of the contextualized work I had done with foster families in Washington State (See Appendix A). Over the summer of 2020, I conducted qualitative research with several parties involved in the Washington State foster care system to gain a better understanding of the context in which these systems operate. Through interviews, observations, ethnography, and literary research I was able to identify the need for community among foster parents.

As I engaged in research, I found that the foster care system in Washington State is struggling to maintain licensed foster families, to the degree that this issue is now being called a crisis. Many foster families, when interviewed, confessed that their experience involved a lack of support and inadequate access to necessary resources (Hutchcroft). This is not a hidden issue; even licensed state workers were able to identify that "foster homes do not get the support they need" (Harris). Coincidentally, the state is struggling to maintain a sufficient number of families willing to house and care for foster children. In recent years, many foster parents have backed down from caring for children, and many children have been sleeping in homeless shelters and hotels without the support of a family. This is a grave predicament, and it must be addressed. Through my research, I found that social workers were overly worked and incapable of offering the added support needed to improve the situation. I also found that private agencies, although offering resources, were not reaching many of the families who needed support the most.

It was through evaluating the information collected through my fieldwork that I recognized the need for a community-centered program designed to support foster families.

Foster Pairing is the suggested program. The program would be enforced by the Washington Department of Children, Youth, and Families and would enable peer to peer connections and support. Through Foster Pairing, local families would be grouped together to create team dynamics with the shared goal of caring for children. As grassroots workers, foster parents are the most experienced when it comes to dealing with the unpredictability of a foster child, which means they are some of the most qualified educators with respect to raising foster children. By enabling foster families to share the knowledge they have gained, Washington State will begin to see a shift in the way foster parents experience the fostering process. No longer would they have to guide a child's development on their own, instead they would have access to a committee of experienced advisors. The final results would be healthier home environments, better experiences for foster families, and an eagerness to continue serving these foster children who are in need.

A Contextualized Approach

The development of the Foster Pairing program would not have been possible if it were not for a contextualized approach. As previously mentioned, contextualization is an approach to development that focuses on the specific values of specific groups of people living or operating within a unique context. Although there are benefits to systematic problem-solving approaches, cross-cultural work must be created based on context in order to be effective. Different cultures understand issues differently, and a general solution often neglects to address the specific elements that make the community's problem unique. This is why context matters. Development workers who enter an issue with a preset plan are less successful than the people who step into the issues with the intent to learn from the hands and feet of the people experiencing the problem

(Easterly 12). Identifying the cultural surroundings is necessary and without it, programs will not succeed.

It was through contextualization that I was able to recognize the need for unique support tailored to the cultural values of foster families. In the foster care system, there is a unique culture found among foster families who encounter similar stressors associated with the housing and care of foster children. When interviewing a foster family, they explained that caring for a foster child "changes the entire dynamic of your family and home" (Oats). In these situations, relationships among relatives look and feel different, and a unique approach towards child development must be taken. The implementation of specific child development practices however would not be recognizable if, as a social change maker, I did not take a moment to evaluate the context in which the developmental work was being done.

However, to undergo contextualization there must also be a level of innovation. When participating in community development, different perspectives need to be considered when creating a solution. This means social change-makers must work with what is already accessible and dream of what could be. This happens when developmental workers first listen to the people they are working with, consider their outsider perspective, and finally, remain aware of the possibilities. By creatively addressing social problems in this manner, you enable people groups to improve and reconstruct the outcomes of their lives.

Listening

A key starting point for culture-based problem-solving has been identified by a social entrepreneur named David Bornstein. In a presentation, Bornstein addressed the fact that social change makers are characterized as being "great at listening" (Bornstein). Through my fieldwork

with foster families, I learned how listening can be one of the most useful tools for innovative development.

Part of my summer fieldwork included various interviews with different foster families. Some of the interviews happened in person, some over zoom, and some over the phone. Regardless of the avenue, these interviews served as informants of the current foster care system. As I talked to families, I learned that on the basic level, foster families experience a unique family culture that differs from the standard American family dynamics. When talking with one family they explained that through their foster care experience they learned that "you can't actually treat [a foster child] as one of your kids" (Downs and Downs). Because of state regulations, families are asked to follow specific parenting protocols that may differ from their regular approach. Similarly, because of their past experiences, foster children have a greater say in what they will and will not participate in, whether it be sports, extracurriculars, or religious activities. Having to adhere to these requirements means that existing family dynamics must adjust, and resultantly the marriage, religious habits, work schedules, and "literally everything" changes (Downs and Downs). In a broad sense, family can take on many meanings but "the family system, like any system, has self-stabilizing properties" (Bornstein et al. 1). For families living in the United States this usually involves systems of mutual respect and care, but for foster families "the concept of family is very different" (Oats). If a project is to address these unique family dynamics, then it is also important to recognize the specific cultural understanding of family shared by the fostering community.

One of the key elements of Foster Pairing is the building of connection between licensed foster parents. By bringing them together, foster families can interact with others who understand their circumstances and can offer input. The word family in "foster family" carries a lot of

weight and it can be difficult to understand and create such a dynamic when a new child enters the picture. Through the connections and conversations brought about by Foster Pairing, the "family" element of foster care can become less ambiguous and more attainable. Licensed caregivers share similar experiences and can therefore support one another based on their personal wisdom and coincidingly, help one another achieve a more stable family dynamic despite living in unique circumstances.

It was through listening that I was able to identify a unique understanding of family shared by the community of people working in foster care. This is one example of how contextualization can be used to properly serve a specific community, but it is also important to note that the principle of listening can make a difference in any situation. Community developers must take the time to listen to the voices of others and identify the values they hold. As an outsider, our perspective is limited. If we are to implement programs that lead to productive change, listening must be a part of the process.

Observing

Secondly, when creatively engaging with other cultures, we also must recognize the outsider's perspective that allows us to observe things with a different set of eyes (Lynn). Having an outsider perspective can be of great benefit to problem-solving through a contextualized approach because it enables you to observe the systems in place, and notice the key elements that others, who have grown accustomed to the system, would have missed. As outsiders, we can look at the holistic picture and "develop deeper explanations of a phenomenon being investigated" (Dusanee and Pranee 2). When the strength of the outside observer combines with the insider knowledge that is collected through listening, innovative solutions naturally emerge. This is a strength of cross-cultural engagement.

In my fieldwork, I recognized how my ability to observe from an outsider's perspective allowed me to contribute to the creative solution of Foster Pairing. As an outsider observer, I was able to not only listen to the difficulties of foster families, but I was also able to identify the inability of social workers to take on extra responsibility. Through interviewing foster families, it was clear that they needed a better point person to offer them advice, support, and access to resources. Naturally, social workers were regularly brought up because many foster families held the expectation that social workers would be accessible when needed. As I listened, I was able to identify this issue, but as an outside observer, I was able to recognize the reasons behind minimal support from social workers. I had the honor of connecting with Angie, a state social worker, to talk about the various tasks and expectations of social workers in Washington State. As we talked, Angie regularly reminded me of the weight that social workers have to carry. Angie explained that "social workers deal with crazy circumstances. They are asked to deal with biological parents, with judges, the child, attorneys…" and not only that, but they also deal with up to 40 cases at one time and end up doing the job of five people (Andrews). Another social worker explained that she got tired of moving kids from one home to another and not seeing things work out (Carmichael). Not only do social workers manage more moving pieces than they should, but they also carry secondary trauma from the kids they work with. It was through this unique and local form of contextualization that I was able to understand why social workers cannot check in with foster parents as often as they would like. Listening informed me of the issue, but as an outside observer, I was able to see how the greater system influenced the problem. This perspective enabled me to steer clear from adding responsibility to the already overworked social workers and instead find a new innovative solution that would still address the problem. Foster Pairing, and peer to peer support was the creative result.

Optimism

The last characteristic I want to highlight about creative contextualization is the necessary "belief that change is possible" (Bornstein). Unlike a business, profit cannot be the driving force behind this kind of developmental work. Instead, a belief that social issues can find lasting change is what keeps any social transformation program alive. The desire to see a better outcome for a community of people must be strong enough to pick up a failed proposal, or meet again with a suborn leader. We must tap into our creative "ability to improve on existing ideas and positively impact the world around" (Kelley and Kelley 18). There must be a motivating factor behind the work being done. Whether passion is fueled by personal connections to life experiences, religious conviction, or a keen disturbance of current social systems, a drive for a better tomorrow is necessary.

I became aware of my passion for the foster care system through my involvement with an organization called Royal Family Kids. As a teenager, I heard about Royal Family Kids through different members of my church and found out that they put on annual camps for foster children in the local area. When I first signed up to volunteer as a staff member for the camp, I had no idea what I was getting into. I just knew I wanted to serve children, and I knew these children needed support. After a week of sleeping in a creaky bed, comforting a child with night terrors, running alongside an escapee, painting birdhouses, dancing with girls for the talent show, and crying with children as they got on the bus, I realized that offering love to a foster child for just one week really meant more than I thought it would. The stories I heard of these foster children and the environments I knew they were returning to, continued to roll through the back of my mind for weeks and weeks after the camp had ended. My willingness to see and love these children made a difference not only in their lives but also in my own. I had become aware of

their desperate need for adequate care, and a week of camp, although refreshing, was not enough. My keen awareness of foster care issues enabled me to be passionate enough to listen through the heartbreaking stories of foster families. My choice to believe that there is a better solution is what encouraged the continual search for a solution such as Foster Pairing, a program that enables foster families to properly care for these children in need.

An optimistic outlook that believes in the possibility for better systems is necessary for the work of community development. Social changemakers will only be able to participate in a contextualized approach if they are willing to view the existing context through the lens of opportunity. Problems exist, and that's why development is needed. It is only when we allow the presence of current problems to be seen as potentials of future success, that contextualized work becomes successful in producing effective lasting change.

Why Contextualization Matters in Community Development

As identified, implementing contextualization in community development can be transformational. However, to comprehend why contextualization is important, we must grasp the relevance of cultural values. Culture is a learned part of our being and is defined as the distinct mental programming that "distinguishes the members of one group… from another" (Hofstede 6). We program our minds to think a certain way through the things we learn in our social environments. They tell us what to value, who to look up to, what symbols to use, and what we must do to be accepted. Each person has a unique culture based on their environment, but because it is learned, our culture is constantly challenged to adapt as our social environment changes.

For foster families, culture shapes and defines how they are to interact with the foster care system. At a macro scale, families living in the United States operate at 46 out of 100 on the

uncertainty avoidance scale ("Compare Countries"). This middle ground score shows how comfortable people in the United States are with the unknown. As previously mentioned, families in the foster care system, however, deal with abnormally inconsistent situations and are asked to adapt to their environment regularly. Acknowledging that foster families work under a lot of uncertainty yet live in a nation that prefers a degree of steadiness should highlight the need for an equilibrator. If the United States valued high levels of uncertainty, the inconsistencies would not be an issue, and there would be no need for intervention.

Contextualization, in this case, shows the need for transformational development in the way the foster care system prepares families for dealing with unfamiliarity. The contextual values of a culture inform the crisis and explain why the inadequacy of the state foster care system is causing foster families to walk away from the system. Through contextualization, the deeper meaning behind the crisis can be identified, and therefore addressed. As social change makers, this should inspire us to participate in community development. As globalization author Thomas Friedman explains, "ignoring this challenge - this need for moral innovation" would be nothing short of naive (Friedman 380). Contextualization allows the deeper issues to surface, and therefore, welcomes developers to act on the problems identified. This is why contextualization is necessary. Without understanding the context, general solutions, although well intended, will continue to miss the heart of the matter and consequentially, enable its further growth. For community development to effectively succeed, contextualization must be part of the process.

Future Work

As Foster Pairing moves forward as a developmental program, I plan to continue to implement the principle of contextualization so that the program remains up to date with the needs of foster families. Working with a specific culture group means that dynamics will continue to shift, and

perceptions will adjust as the Foster Pairing programs get implemented. As a result, it will be crucial to the contextualized approach that I regularly stay in communication with the key members and evaluate the core values being addressed. This type of work should involve ongoing research and it is important that as community developers we "stand back, make sense of what [we] have, and make decisions about selection" (Sunstein and Cheiseri-Strater 347). Although a contextualized stance may lead to transformational solutions, cultures change and so should the programs that are designed to support the people. So long as I continue as a community developer working with foster families, contextualization will need to be a part of the transformation process. Without it, there will be no long-term results.

Conclusion

Contextualization when continually used in community development can lead to lasting social change. Through the Foster Pairing program, culturally focused social work was shown to be an effective and impactful approach in helping rewrite the narrative of social issues. Contextualization happens when community developers creatively listen to the people they are working with, embrace their ability to observe as an outsider, and choose to believe in the possibility of better solutions. Once established contextualization uproots the heart of social issues and enables transformative work to take place. If we are to see effective change, we must embrace the contextualized approach to development that values people and the culture they are a part of.

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ESSAY 2: QUALITATIVE INQUIRY

Introduction to Qualitative Inquiry

For community development practices to be effective within a desired context, a certain level of research must first take place. Qualitative inquiry is a unique approach to research that focuses on rich description and comprehensive understanding, two values that align with developmental work. Unlike quantitative research, the hypothesis is not the starting point of the qualitative work. Instead, researchers allow the holistic data they gather to inform their hypothesis or proposal. As I engaged in my fieldwork, I used qualitative inquiry to collect data surrounding the topic of the foster care system in Washington State. As I began my research, I did not know what to expect. Having only limited background experience, there were many systems that I had to respectfully work with to establish an understanding of the topic.

Despite my background knowledge, my engagement in qualitative research led me to uncover a pressing issue in the Washington state foster care system. Right now, the Washington foster care system is hurting. In the last couple of years, the number of children in need of a foster placement, in comparison to the number of beds available, has become a pressing concern. There are not enough places where children can safely reside while their parent's issues are being either resolved or deemed terminal. As a result, many of these children have had to spend nights in hotel rooms, offices, and even homeless shelters, experiencing difficult conditions that only add to their emotional trauma. This is an issue in Washington State that is now being called a crisis by social workers and foster families involved.

Through qualitative methods, I was able to identify the crisis being faced by the Washington foster care system. This research first and foremost exposed the pertinent issue, but at the same time it highlighted key stakeholders who could initiate lasting transformation.

Although thought to be true, the insufficient number of beds for foster children did not come from a major increase in registered children in Washington State ("Washington Housing"). The issue predominantly stems from a lack of foster families with homes to offer. As I dug deeper, several interviews and connections clarified that this is rooted in a deeper issue pertaining to improper support for foster families. Despite training and periodic respite relief, foster families are regularly feeling ill-equipped to manage the unpredictability of foster children. Taking it a step further, the lack of support tied back to social workers and their inability to offer assistance because of overflowing caseloads. Because of the taxing demands associated with the job, there is a high need for social workers yet few who are willing to take on the role. Many social workers experience emotional and physical burnout because they do not have the time or resources to properly support the various children and families under their care. Through my qualitative research I got to hear stories from several perspectives, all of which informed my understanding of this crisis and allowed me to recognize potential points of action.

It was after the qualitative study and after considering each of the key stakeholders that I was able to recognize the role of foster parents in this crisis of insufficient beds. As previously mentioned, the lack of perceived support for foster families has led to a decrease in licensed foster homes available. Although support for these foster parents could be added to the responsibilities of social workers, the acknowledgment that social workers are already dealing with excessive workloads clarifies that such an approach would only cause further difficulties. All this context contributed to the problem-solving strategies that lead to the Foster Pairing program (See Appendix A). Hearing the perspective of social workers and foster families contributed to the recognition of insufficient communal support among foster families. Without

qualitative research, I would not have been able to identify the need for relational connections and support among foster parents experiencing similar situations.

This is the power of qualitative research. Not only does it identify the issue, but it unfolds the narrative behind the problem in a way that enables innovative solutions to develop and lasting transformation to take place. Regarding the foster care system, my qualitative research contributed to the development of a program that would offer foster families support and enable them to create safe environments for foster children. But, when looked at more broadly, qualitative inquiry could be used in developmental work for so much more. Using my fieldwork as a basis for comparison, this essay will aim to unpack the practices of qualitative research and identify how they line up with the values of community development and explain how they can lead to a long-asting contextualized transformation.

The Qualitative Approach

To begin, we must identify what qualitative research is. In its simplest form, qualitative research is "an inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting" (Creswell 1). Unlike traditional forms of research, which focus on common statistics and variables, qualitative inquiry focuses on "understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam and Tisdell 15). This method can also take on many different forms. Qualitative research can be conducted through "case studies, oral histories, participant observations, action research, ethnography, netnography, autoethnography, interviews, grounded theory, and action research, to name but a few" (Lanka et al. 2). Despite its many forms, qualitative research always incorporates three key elements: A subjective perspective, the natural

setting of research content, and a focus on human experiences (Lanka et al. 2). The ultimate goal is to gain rich knowledge along with observable information. Each of the approaches to qualitative research amplifies different information, and therefore, should be implemented according to the context of the study and desired outcomes.

As a researcher studying the foster care system, I primarily engaged in the practices of ethnography and interviews. I shadowed caseworkers and assisted with childcare for foster children while also interacting with social workers and foster parents. Through my research, I gained valuable insight into the power dynamics between foster parents and the state, stressors associated with bringing in a new child to a home, and the deep feelings experienced by foster parents and children when plans do not go as expected. Qualitative inquiry focuses on experiences, not just statistics, and as a result, this form of study brings forth many benefits to researchers who choose to conduct research in this manner.

The Value of Qualitative Method

Although quantitative studies are effective for collecting data and identifying problems, the process of qualitative research pushes beyond identification and encourages development. When engaging in qualitative inquiry, a researcher participates in the study in a unique way. It begins with the researcher becoming a part of the data collecting process, followed by the development of an adaptable perspective, and finally acknowledging the potential growth and ability to contribute. As a researcher participates in this kind of research, transformative change becomes possible because the researcher's perspective reorients to see the opportunities that will lead to lasting change. This is what makes qualitative work significant.

The Value of Researcher Engagement

The ability for qualitative work to lead to transformation begins with the researcher. Engaging in qualitative inquiry requires a different level of participation on behalf of the researcher than other study methods do. In qualitative inquiry, "the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis" (Merriam and Tisdell 16). Instead of using surveys to get written answers, a qualitative researcher asks questions and listens with their entirety. Details such as tone fluctuations, facial expressions, and the setting where the meeting was suggested to take place, all offer the researcher data that words on a survey would not provide. But in order to collect qualitative data, a researcher must be willing to engage in embodied research.

According to Seth M. Holmes, the practice of embodied research is necessary to the process of meeting with another and developing an understanding of their situation. Holmes is an experienced ethnographer who dedicated years of his life to the qualitative study of Triqui migrant workers in the United States and wrote about it in his book *Fresh Fruit Broken Bodies*. Through his work, Holmes realized that "there is a series of phenomena of great importance which cannot possibly be recorded by questioning or computing documents but have to be observed in their full actuality" (Holmes 32). The lived experience matters. Exposure to an environment offers a researcher new perspectives and valuable information that quantitative studies cannot offer.

As I was exposed to the realities faced by foster families, I took note of the frustrations expressed by foster parents concerning children lashing out in response to an unidentified trigger. However, it was through my personal experience trying to manage a 7-year-old boy that this issue became clear. As I supervised this boy, I picked up on a pattern: every time he was asked to

take a seat, the boy would try to run out the door. It was through moments like these that I was able to identify with the distress and confusion surrounding the expectation to manage a child whose natural response opposed all norms I had grown accustomed to. Words do not express the deep sadness that sinks in when you realize the child is responding in such a way because their experiences have conditioned them to believe that their ability to run is their only defense against harm. An interview transcript will never be able to fully express the hopelessness that takes over your mind when you realize that your training and efforts, no matter how well you perfect them, will not work because the child you are working with has experienced unique trauma that requires continual adaptation.

Holmes clarifies that "the body is not something that I have or that I use to find data; rather, I am my body, and my body itself/myself produces field data" (Holmes 34). Qualitative ethnographic studies allow the researcher to become a part of the research. Thoughts and feelings, as well as the sights, scents and pains experienced by a qualitative researcher, all contribute to the rich depth of understanding. The researcher is the key instrument to qualitative work, and as a result, the questioner no longer remains an outside observer to the problem, but a participatory documenter.

The Value of a New Perspective

In the process of embodied research, the questioner must take the information they find and allow it to influence their perspective so that innovative ideas can emerge. When engaging in this kind of study, the "researcher gathers data to build concepts, hypotheses, or theories rather than deductively testing hypotheses as in positive research" (Merriam and Tisdell 17). The goal in this research is to recognize the existing context and resources surrounding the problem being

studied. Through the process of gathering existing information, a researcher gains a new perspective that expands their problem-solving abilities.

This approach is beneficial to a researcher because, as an individual develops, the human brain continues to create and strengthen neural pathways based on what they have seen work in the past. The more common an occurrence the stronger the neural pathway grows and the more likely a researcher is to depend on what has been "tried and true". The same takes place for negative associations, and this often leads to discriminatory practices. This can be difficult to manage because associations develop quickly, "often after a single presentation of an unconditioned stimulus in a fear-learning paradigm. Once learned, such associations extinguish slowly" (Amodio and Devine 653). This neurological phenomenon can make it harder for researchers with previous understandings of effective solutions to adapt their ideas to new environments. This is why qualitative research enables new perspectives. By encouraging a researcher to participate in a qualitative study, the researcher is positioned in a space where new associations are welcomed to develop, and as a result, understandings of new potentials emerge.

The Value of Exposure

Finally, by engaging in qualitative work, a researcher allows themself to potentially be affected by a catalytic moment which can redirect their efforts towards transformative community work once the study is complete. When you consider the last two sections, it becomes apparent how qualitative research can propel individuals towards sustaining work. Through embodied exposure, a researcher begins to "recognize the impossibility of separating research from human relationships" (Holmes 37). When you become a part of your research, you recognize the connections between the work and the people, between the labor and the pain. Similarly, by allowing new perspectives of success and opportunity to develop, you become a

valuable contributor to the problem-solving conversation. Not only do you carry outsider insight, but you also carry insider care. The combination of these elements leads to a moment known as a catalytic event. A catalytic event is a moment where individuals are made aware of a specific situation that forces them to question their beliefs and respond with new insight. These moments are "often painful but necessary experiences that happen to individuals and organizations and serve to jump-start a reconciliation process" (McNeil 42). In my research I experienced a catalytic moment when meeting up with Heather, a volunteer who served at a group foster home.

As I asked Heather about her experience working with foster children, she was quick to bring up her relationship with a young teenage girl who I will refer to as Avery. Avery was a schizophrenic girl that Heather had met through the group home she volunteered at. Over time Heather developed a special relationship with Avery despite the misbehavior that regularly took place. Heather explained "she was violent, like very violent… but whenever we were together, there was never a problem" (Malo). I noticed emotional hesitancy in Heather as she slowed the pace of her voice while explaining the situation. Due to her mental state and physical outlashes, Heather was continually advised not to foster or adopt Avery. Eventually, Avery was sent away to a mental hospital, but Heather chose to continue the relationship by visiting her every weekend. However, the heartbreaking issue arose when Avery was finally released and there were no foster homes available to place her in.

What Heather had explained so far was difficult, but what she was about to explain, changed my approach towards research. Heather started telling extensive stories of children who, because of the lack of homes, would experience situations that no child should endure. Children would spend their days in state offices unfit for child supervision. The children had no

toys or play areas, just television monitors. At the end of the day the children would be dropped off at improperly supervised motels and homeless shelters to sleep at night. All three of their meals came either from Mcdonalds or Subway vouchers, and throughout the day there was no emotional support given. What was hardest to process was that the older children would be sent to homeless shelters to sleep in co-ed rooms with people of all ages. As a preface, what is about to be mentioned could be triggering. Heather tried to hold back tears as she explained another story of a girl, who at 14, was raped and lost her virginity while spending the night at a homeless shelter. For Avery, not having a home to enter left her in similar circumstances, and there was nothing Heather could do about it. This story served as a personal catalytic event, where an issue became real, and change became necessary.

It was through my qualitative work that I recognized how my "deep gladness meets the world's deep need" (Palmer 16). My inner desire to live within and create a world where children thrive and homes are safe, collided with the research I conducted. As I processed this information, it urged me to address the issue from a new perspective. My research not only informed me, but it made me question my ability to contribute to a better tomorrow for the children I was researching.

Although a catalytic event is but one moment, it has the power to initiate lasting change. Recognizing the deep need in the world "allows us to move from the isolation and stagnation of life in homogenous groups and break through into a new reality that introduces us to something we have never experienced before" (McNeil 45). If willing to embrace the involved process of qualitative inquiry, researchers will begin to identify unaddressed issues, and therefore contribute to the effective transformation of communities.

Qualitative Research in Relation to Community Development

When working within other communities, there are three values that need to be considered in order to produce productive results. These values include contextualization, copowerment and collaboration. When comparing these values, it becomes apparent how qualitative research can support developmental practices.

The first value to consider is contextualization. Contextualization is the "practice of designing programs and processes with attention to the particular cultural characteristics and inherent resources of a given people, place and time" (Clark). Qualitative inquiry encompasses contextualized work because of the way it welcomes the researcher to become a part of the context of study. The researcher becomes a part of the context and uses the information gained to influence the study.

Secondly, developmental work values copowerment. Copowerment is "a dynamic of mutual exchange through which both sides of a social equation are made stronger and more effective by the other" (Inslee). By allowing other perspectives to have voice, qualitative research embodies the developmental value of copowerment. Qualitative work recognizes the strengths of another and uses them to shape the perspective of the community developer. It is through this mutual exchange of knowledge that programs are better designed to fit the needs of a community and therefore, help create lasting change. Approaching qualitative work from the perspective of Copowerment allows diverse perspectives to have a voice and simultaneously, encourage holistic change.

Finally, the third value of community development practices is collaboration. If considered closely, we can realize that "a problem arises when each group begins to think it is self-sufficient in its own identity" (Katongole and Rice 29). As humanity, we were designed to

be in relationship with differing people, and as we deviate from this human necessity, we welcome the consequences that follow. Qualitative inquiry encourages cross communication and therefore points towards collaboration. By working in the context of study you engage in a "weird dance, [where] they have to learn your perspective and you theirs"(Oats). Once you've understood the approach of the other, collaboration becomes possible and development work becomes effective.

Engaging with other cultures can be challenging, and to succeed it requires contextualization, copowerment and collaboration. Participating in qualitative work prevents researchers from failing to recognize the perspective of another and therefore helps break down the roadblocks that prohibit different strengths from maximizing the benefit of community development.

Continuing with Qualitative Work

Because qualitative research produces different results, proposals and hypotheses that result from the studies must also be evaluated through a different lens. Foster Pairing is a project proposal that resulted from the qualitative work I participated in. Evaluation of a proposal is essential to any potential growth and therefore it is necessary to include an appropriate framework.

When considering a project qualitatively, there must be a basis for evaluation. Because foster pairing works with foster families to create a healthier home environment for foster children, immediate results are far from likely. The human factor of foster parents and children implies the need for a longitudinal study that can show how foster children are able to properly develop as a result of healthier home environments and parenting practices. Child development is also an inanimate variable and therefore a framework must be introduced to bring structure to evaluation. The Developmental Assets Framework, found in Appendix B, is a tool that is used to

evaluate the holistic wellbeing of a child. This framework was chosen because the "level of developmental assets explains students' success two times more powerfully than do the demographic factors of socioeconomic status, race and ethnicity, gender, or family composition" (Benson 89). By creating case studies that are evaluated over time and comparing the growth in developmental assets as Foster Pairing takes place, proper evaluation of the structural work could be collected to determine its success.

However, because immediate results could not be gathered from the former method, another approach should be used for a timelier evaluation. As a result, I have also proposed using the Logical Framework that can be found in Appendix C. A Logical Framework, or a "matrix which provides an overview of a project's goal, activities and anticipated results", allows a project to be evaluated as it continues developing and can produce more rapid indicators to the strength of the project (Collin). This method of evaluation also shows more than just the statistical outputs and remains true to qualitative work.

Using qualitative elements in evaluations is important to the work of community development because it shows stakeholders how transformation will take place and offers a standard of accountability. Qualitative work can be difficult to present, but by including evaluating frameworks, researchers can explain the gravity of a crisis while also ensuring that the proposed project truly addresses the issues that were primarily identified.

Conclusion

Qualitative inquiry offers a different perspective to research that aligns well with the values of community development. To engage in qualitative inquiry there must be a level of passion and involvement that often comes from a catalytic moment or a moral conviction. But as social changemakers choose to participate in the involved process of learning new perspectives from

the context of the study, transformation will begin to take place. As researcher, we must realize that if we are not intentional, we may get fixated on a perception of reality that may hinder us from reaching the world we were meant to serve. If we are to do the involved work of community development, we must embrace a qualitative approach. Embodied research that looks to learn from the experience of others will be the enabling piece that welcomes lasting change.

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ESSAY 3: INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY DEVLEOPMENT VALUES

Introduction to International Community Development Values

Over the course of my involvement in the International Community Development (ICD) master's program at Northwest University, my personal values have grown and adapted, therefore changing the way I approach community development. When I began the ICD program, my understanding of social change was minute. I was unaware of the strengths that enabled me to contribute to specific conversations, as well as undereducated on how I ought to go about leading reformation. Throughout the program, I experienced personal transformation regarding my understanding of how I could participate in upholding social justice. It was also through this growth that I learned to value contextualization, copowerment, and collaboration as essential qualities of community development. Moving forward, these newfound values have shaped and will continue to influence my engagement with the systems of society I partake in and therefore, enable me to participate in effective changes. By identifying my transformation throughout the International Community Development program, as well as the effects of my growth on the topic of social issues, I will explain how my values have shifted to more effectively encompass holistic community development that leads to lasting change.

Understanding the Importance of Values

To understand the importance of my personal transformation, there must first be a discussion on the topic of values. Values, both individual and communal, play a significant role in how people choose to interact with the world around them. In a general sense, values are the varying degrees of importance that people choose to place on specific objects or actions. People then contribute to the systems of society based on what they have deemed useful, worthwhile, or valuable.

It is also important to note that values are first learned, and then adopted. When it comes to personal values, "…you don't 'find' them. You choose them. You have to do the work of exploring and looking and selecting and owning" (Hayes 55). To establish personal values, each individual must take the time to look at the world and identify how they are affected by the various systems around them. It is through observation and analysis that we determine what is worth our time and energy. Valuing certain systems and behaviors is often a result of education, whether formal or informal. For example, we are taught that different products are worth different amounts, and that specific characteristics can determine our success or failure. It is after we learn the importance of different behaviors and objects that we begin the process of deciding the degree to which we will value such things.

What people value determines the kind of life they live. Once specific values are established, they "…are an inexhaustible source of motivation-inexhaustible because they are qualities intrinsic to being and doing" (Hayes 55). In a way, values are the moral compasses that guide our thinking and encourage us to speak and act in the ways we do. As I have continued to learn about social transformation, I have realized that focusing on personal and communal values is an essential prerequisite to any kind of developmental work. My values affect the way I interact with different people groups, and a community's values affect their receptivity to any kind of change.

Understanding the importance of values lays the groundwork for the personal transformation I have experienced while a part of the ICD program. Although I entered the program with strong values, those values were based on the minimal education I had had on the topic of social justice. As I continued learning, my values began to adapt to the new information I was gathering. As I studied elements of cultures, the world, and myself, I began the process of

evaluating what actually matters in the context of development. Because of this, I am now at a place where my heart for developmental work has significantly strengthened, and my approach toward community development has entirely shifted.

Personal Transformation

As a participant in this program, my values and my understanding of how I ought to interact with the world began to shift as I continued to discover my abilities in relation to the world's great needs. Entering the program, I was unaware of the influence I had as a result of the setbacks that I have overcome. Similarly, I was under-informed of the proper practices that lead to respectful development within differing communities. Because of these mindsets, I did not see myself as capable of contributing to the conversation of social change, nor did I understand the importance of doing so. It was through my fieldwork for the ICD program that I became aware of my ability to speak about social issues, and it was through personal reflection that I learned to value my experiences for the influence they can have.

Fieldwork: A Catalytic Realization

During the summer semester of the ICD program, my engagement in qualitative research changed my perspective about the differences I could be making. I engaged in qualitative fieldwork with the intent to learn about the Washington state foster care system. Through interviewing various stakeholders who work in foster care, I discovered that the system was in crisis and in desperate need of safe places in which to house existing foster children. Studies showed that between August 2019 and August 2020 "caseworkers housed foster kids in state offices 284 times." This is a drastic shift from the previous record in 2017 which had 47 overnight office stays ("Washington Housing"). This issue concerns many foster care workers, especially social workers who are responsible for the child's placement. Looking further, it

became clear that many factors have played into this crisis. As I spoke with foster parents, the common theme of inadequate support for foster families became apparent. Simultaneously, the state, who would usually be the one offering support, is struggling to retain social workers who can manage the taxing demands associated with foster care. Turnover in this field is high, and many social workers identified that the emergent pace of their work meant they could not offer holistic support (Carmichael). The system is crumbling and at a glance, there appears to be no solution.

However, as an outsider to the system I was able to look at the factors contributing to this foster care crisis and respectfully propose a solution based on the development practices I had been learning. Part of my fieldwork included interactions with foster parents, social workers, private agencies, biological parents, supportive third parties, and even the foster children themselves. Because I heard from various perspectives, I was able to identify the need for community among the many foster families who were feeling isolated. Since I took a holistic approach that noted the various dimensions of the issue, the information I offered was valued and respected. As I talked with foster care members, they thanked me for doing the research, and many expressed interests in my final work as well as an eagerness to learn from the other conversations I had been a part of (Downs and Downs). Noticing the interest of others was at first surprising because, before my fieldwork, I only had minimal experience working with foster care. Yet, because of my willingness to learn and get involved, I developed a credible voice that allowed me to speak into issues of the foster care system and suggest change.

The realization that I could encourage social change became a moment of catalytic shift, forcing me to rethink my position and stance in society. When referring to a catalytic event, the realization phase is marked as "a state of awareness that *requires a response* because it literally

changes everything we thought we understood about an experience" (Salter McNiel 57). In my situation, I was unaware of my ability to influence the systems around me. However, my newfound awareness forced me to reconsider how I had been stewarding my voice, and to question the value I had placed on my ability to contribute to difficult social conversations.

It was through my fieldwork that I began to recognize my ability to influence social change. Even with minimal experience and general understandings, I was welcomed and encouraged to contribute to the conversation of the foster care crisis because the key members of the system recognized my willingness to learn and valued my unique perspective. This was the beginning of the personal transformation I experienced. Working with the foster care system informed me of my ability to participate in community development, but it was not until I started evaluating my own experiences that I began to identify myself as a social change maker and realize that my daily life can serve as an influence.

Continued Transformation Through Personal Reflection

It was after recognizing my ability to contribute to the growth and improvement of the social system that I began to question the elements of my life that had led me to believe I was incapable of causing change. By reflecting on my life, it becomes more apparent that my experiences have led me to struggle with a limiting mindset.

I am a second-generation Hispanic immigrant who has grown up in the greater Seattle area. I am also a female who was raised in unstable circumstances as a result of my father's prolonged medical struggles. These elements of my life have historically and statistically informed me of my limitations and caused me to believe that I hold no power to make changes in the world around me (Rattan and Dweck 677). Based on my life circumstances, I statistically should not be in higher education, and I should not be equipped with the knowledge and skills to

inform social systems of the ways in which they could improve. However, as a child I did not recognize my predicted fate as a social problem. I simply understood the "role" I was expected to play within society, and to a certain degree, I accepted it (Ginsburg and McClain 318). I believed that if I wanted to see anything happen in my life, I would have to work twice as hard as others. Even now that I have have pursued a higher education, I still struggle to believe that I belong in a classroom because I know it does not fit the stereotypical molds of what is expected of me. This mindset is a result of hegemonic vision or "socially constructed perceptions and assumptions about 'what is,' 'what could be,' and 'what ought to be' that maintain the power or privilege of some people over others" (Moe-Lobeda 88). Because I had grown accustomed to the assumptions of my life based on the circumstances I grew up in, I believed that I was truly incapable of contributing to social changes. Looking back, it seems obvious that my mindset was hindering me, but as I lived with it, I was so unaware of the ways I was being restricted. Even now that I have recognized my tendency to fall into these patterns of thinking, I still find that I go blind to it if I do not take the time to reflect on the reasons behind my thought processes.

Recognizing my limited mindset toward development was a crucial part of my personal transformation. It showed me the ways in which I had allowed perceptions of my identity to withhold me from serving the communities I wanted to support. However, it has been the following final step in this personal transformation journey that I have learned to value most. After I recognized my hegemonic vision, I began to critically look at my life and re-identify many of my setbacks or limitations as strengths that can encourage me to continue forward as a social change advocate.

Influence on My Future

As previously stated, I recognize that my current voice does not match the expected "role" a hegemonic vision would tell me I should play. According to the norms we have allowed to persist, I should not hold any influence. Yet, through the ICD program I have been able to identify my ability to make a difference in the current world. As a result, I feel compelled to question the social issues I could and should be addressing with the influence that I have been given.

In the first weeks of the ICD program, I read a text about vocation by Parker Palmer. Nearing the end of the program, I was asked to read it again, and both times, I was struck by the same quote. "*The deepest vocational question is not 'What ought I to do with my life?' It is the more elemental and demanding 'Who am I? What is my nature?'*" (Palmer 15). Palmer highlights the importance of recognizing our abilities and limitations as a means to uncover our purposeful design. Being successful is not about setting our minds to accomplish something, but instead, it is about discovering what we are individually designed to do. I am a female minority, and through proper education I have learned to value my voice. My voice is capable of speaking into social issues pertaining to women, Hispanics, and second-generation immigrants. Due to my personal choices, I am also able to advocate for foster children, special education, the Christian church and even state social workers. Reflecting on this text caused me to look inward towards my abilities and setbacks before thinking of the outward change I could be a part of. As a result, I uncovered fields of community development in which my experiences naturally offer me credibility. This is why my personal transformation matters. By acknowledging my presence in social systems as well as my personal assets, I have been able to identify more opportunities in

which I can advocate for community development in a way that will lead to necessary social justice.

The Approach

As much as my values have been shaped by my experiences in the ICD program, my education on proper methods of social justice have also played an integral role in the transformation I have experienced. Through the courses of the ICD program my ability to value specific approaches such as copowerment, contextualization and collaboration has exponentially grown.

Understanding Social Justice

Before engaging in this program, my understanding of social justice was limited to the courthouse. I was inaccurately aware of the ways in which social justice could be achieved and how these issues could incorporate various members of society. When taken literally, social justice can be understood as "fairness as it manifests in society" ("What Does Social Justice Mean"). But to a community developer, social justice must mean something more.

As a result of my exposure to injustices, my understanding of social justice has evolved beyond that of a textbook definition. I have learned that social justice is very much a community-based value. Throughout history, we have found that as danger presented itself, we "homosapiens became social animals that worked together. The natural reaction is trust and cooperation" (Sinek). Through systems we develop cooperative practices, but this is where social justice comes into play. When we, as social animals, do not cooperate for the mutual success of one another, we consequently hurt the systems of trust that were designed to protect us from harm. According to various studies, many believe in the need for justice (David 16). As a result, various approaches to restoring social justice have been developed, and some are more effective than others. As a result of this understanding, I am now inclined to live a life that pursues social

change through proper measures that respect the people I work with and lead to effective change.

ICD Values as the Method How

Throughout my time in the ICD program, many principals were taught, but all can be encompassed by the values of copowerment, contextualization and collaboration. Copowerment refers to the mutual learning and strengthening that should take place when different perspectives contribute to a conversation. Contextualization is a practice that ensures all methods of change happen with consideration of the community's values and systems. And finally, collaboration suggests diversity within discussions to find the best solutions in decision-making processes.

These three elements are necessary for constructive social change to take place. Thankfully engaging these principals is not difficult, "we intuitively know the ingredients for leading collectively. We [just] need to live them more consciously" (Kuenkel 131). As human beings living in a world of outside dangers, we know we need support from others. But social justice problems arise when individuals or people groups begin to perceive themselves as self-sufficient, without need of community support. For these reasons I have learned to value copowerment as a crucial element to social justice. By continually encouraging mutual growth and support, people become aware of the benefits that come from partnering with others. Often times a community will already have the needed resources to address an issue, they simply need the outsider's perspective to initiate change (Inslee). Both the community and outside change-advocate are necessary for transformation to take place. This is why copowerment is essential to developmental work.

As I have engaged in the content of the ICD program, I have also learned to value approaches to social justice that focus on sustainable and respectful practices. Without an

understanding of these approaches, my newfound eagerness to engage in social change would be incomplete. It is through the ICD program that I was able to redefine the values I had regarding developmental approaches. As a result, I am now able to connect my personal values of advocating for social change with the proper practices that would actually lead to the production of desired results.

Conclusion

Through engaging with the transformative content of Northwest University's International Community Development program, I have been able to identify my values in relation to social justice and discover my place in the building of healthy and constructive communities that encourage mutual respect, growth, and lasting success. Values affect the way people interact with the world, and as a community developer, understanding my values matters. Through reflection of my personal experiences, as well as ICD course content, my value for social change has grown to the degree that it influences my daily interactions. I now look for opportunities to bring outside perspectives into decision making processes so that my work and beliefs develop in strength. I have been given a voice and the power to influence, and as a result, it is my responsibility as a member of society to contribute to the growth of healthy systems that ensure wellbeing for all. Social justice is needed in our world, and to see a change it must begin with one. I plan to be one, and I hope others will join too.

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APPENDIX A: PROJECT PROPOSAL

Foster Pairing: A Call for The Washington State Department of Children, Youth and

Families to Engage in a Community Centered Approach to Foster Care

By Leslie Berger

Project Introduction

The state foster care system in Washington provides inadequate support for foster families who

are supporting children in need of refuge from their home environments. Simultaneously, in

Washington state, there is a major shortage of certified homes in which to place foster children.

These two facts are not coincidental. These issues have been brought up among many nonprofits

and private agencies, but they have not been properly addressed by the state. Although state

social workers would normally be the ones expected to offer foster families resources, the

current system is leaving social workers consumed by logistical tasks at the expense of offering

support. As a result, nonprofits have stepped in to offer therapy and engaging programs, but even

still, the gap between supply and demand for such resources has left many families unattended

and uncared for.

The lack of support for foster families has both damaged the reputation of foster care and

hurt the foster children intended to be helped. Foster children are especially in need of support

because they are living in developmentally vulnerable circumstances. Studies have shown that

"children have multiple capacities and multiple developmental requirements that need to be

fostered if they are to be healthy and strong" (Boyden et al. 25). Foster children are especially

deprived of many, if not all these requirements. Without intervention and proper structures

designed for their success, these children will grow up with developmental setbacks that

statistically lead to further issues including substance abuse, homelessness, delinquency, and the

increase of children in foster care ("Developmental Assets"). The success of these children translates to the further success of our societies.

Foster families are the drivers of the foster care system in Washington state, and their ability to support foster children upholds the child welfare system. Therefore, ensuring the well-being of foster parents is crucial to maintaining the functionality of the foster care system. This issue cannot be addressed by social workers, as they are overworked and in need of support themselves. Instead, support must come from people who share in the struggles of caring for foster children. Foster caregivers are the most highly equipped supporters to other foster parents because of their shared experiences of daily interacting with foster kids. The solution must be more than a referral to new child-centered program or therapy session. The answer must be found in a foster parent community.

As identified, foster families are improperly supported, and this is a result of being improperly connected. When studied, researchers found that "Americans today are seeking connection with others who share their values. But they're not involved in communities that typically provide deep ongoing connection, membership, and life-honoring rituals" (Vogl xvii). Foster families for the most part are navigating their experiences without peers to reflect with. Support for foster families does not need to come from state authority. Instead, support from peers who are experiencing the same daily circumstances may be the determining factor that will lead to the reshaping of the experiences of foster parents.

Empowering foster parents to participate in Foster Pairing, a community centered approach to foster care, will therefore encourage them to engage in holistic development that will lead to stable homes and the decrease of displacement of foster children. Healthier living environments lead to better outcomes for foster children and a better experience for foster

families. The process of Foster Pairing will redefine the reputation of foster care by encouraging community engagement, and thus shrink the gap between the need for beds and the number of homes available.

Overview of Foster Care

Before establishing the need for community amongst foster families, it is important to first understand and interpret the cultural systems that make up foster care. This next section will provide a general overview of the operations of the Washington State foster care system, the developmental effects on foster children, and the pressures faced by foster parents. Through evaluating the context, systemic issues within foster care will become more apparent and therefore highlight the need for programs such as Foster Pairing that will enact change.

Washington Foster Care

As defined by Child Welfare, foster care "is a temporary service provided by States for children who cannot live with their families" ("Foster Care"). Child Protective Services, as a part of the Washington Department of Children, Youth and Families, are the ones who remove children from their homes when there is a report or sign of abuse and neglect. Once a child is removed from their home, the child is placed in protective custody for up to 72 hours. Based on the court's review, the case may require that the child be placed in foster care for an extended period while the biological parent's case is managed ("Department of Children, Youth & Families"). The goal is for a child to be in foster care for no longer than a year. However, in most cases, the stagnant recovery of biological parents and their refusal to surrender parental rights causes the child's prolonged involvement in the system for years (Webb). In the last years Washington State has been experiencing a steady increase of children entering the foster care system, with reports in 2017 totaling 10,729 ("Foster Care State Data"). During their time in

foster care, these children experience heavy transitions. A child in foster care usually rotates

through various social workers and on average, lives in up to 30 homes (Andrews). While

children are in foster care, the system fights for the reunification of the child with their biological

parents, so long as it does not place the child in danger of harm.

Foster Children

Being a part of the foster care system often leads to many other setbacks that should also

be noted when discussing foster children. These repercussions can be tied to family separation

and recurring trauma. Regardless of the reason for foster placement, children who enter the foster

care system carry trauma from home experiences and the removal process. Studies continually

show that children who live in stressful and dysfunctional environments are hindered from

developing at the same rate as their peers. This places foster children at a higher "risk for school

failure or dropout" (Perfect et al. 1). Aside from trauma, separation from kin has also been found

to correlate with aggressive behaviors and a lack of trust in adult figures (Nesmith 2). Child

developmental psychologist, Urie Bronfenbrenner, spoke of this when he explained that

"Mother-infant interactions across time emerges as the most powerful predictor of developmental

outcome" (38). Although foster children are removed from their homes for their physical and

emotional safety, it oftentimes leads to developmental downfall. Any work that engages foster

children must acknowledge this setback and adjust accordingly.

Foster Parents

Foster parents are the ground operators who make the foster care system work. Foster

parents are the ones who welcome children into their homes and "operate as semi-professional

extensions of child welfare agencies, balancing obligations with genuine emotional investment

and development of parent-child bonds" (Shdaimah and Jonas 2). This involvement is crucial to

the state's ability to support children who are removed from their homes. However, serving children in this sense also comes at a taxing cost. Becoming a foster parent is a "long and invasive process" (Leon). The state goes through family records, conducts home checks, and every possible shortcoming is highlighted and evaluated. For some families, the process of getting licensed is enough to turn them away, yet the process is necessary to ensure that children are placed in safe and loving homes. Being a foster parent also involves sacrifice. Although foster families can choose certain behaviors that they will not accept in a child placement, many foster homes still adjust based on the behaviors of the child they are caring for. Through conversation, a foster family explained that "when [a foster child] refuses to go to religious activities, we missed out on months of church" (Oats). This family also told stories of their garden being ruined and missed holiday traditions. Although they mentioned sacrifices, they were also quick to explain that "at the end of the day, it is just a weird dance. The foster child has to learn your perspective and you theirs. You are not the only one sacrificing" (Oats). Being a foster parent is more than having an extra bed for a child to sleep in, it's nurturing a child with developmental setbacks and supporting them through a situation in which they have little control. With so many children in need of care, support for foster parents must take place to ensure the health of these key contributors.

The Lack of Beds

In the last five years, Washington has begun to experience what many are calling a foster care crisis. Since 2015, the gap between housing available and children admitted into the foster care system has been growing exponentially. A 2020 report showed that "kids stayed in state offices, hotels and a few other so-called 'placement exceptions' for 1,863 nights in the latest reporting year, ending Aug. 31. That's up from 1,514 in the previous year" ("Washington Housing").

Although other factors have played into this dilemma, including the outbreak of Covid-19 and

inconsistencies in government funding, this problem has been growing since before these issues

presented themselves as concerns.

This, however, leads workers of the foster care system to question the reasoning behind

this present dilemma. Some have recognized that "older child adoption and moving back with

biological parents aren't happening like they should" (Bullard). At the same time, others have

considered issues with the involvement of biological parents in the adoption process (Knight).

Although these are relevant issues, there is another element that has correlated with the growing

gap over the years. Alongside the growing dissonance between foster children and foster homes

has been the decline in positive experiences for foster families. Recent study showed that "over a

period of six years, foster careers requested a change in fostering arrangements in 42.2% of

cases" (Sturla et al. 2). Nearly half of all foster care placements in the last few years have left

foster parents feeling incapable of fostering a child. This is an issue. Licensed foster families in

Washington State are diminishing, and a lack of support is evident.

Addressing the Lack of Foster Homes

Although acknowledging the lack of families involved in the foster care system is important, the

information remains useless until it is acted upon and dissected to understand the reasoning

behind it. For any program to have great success, action must be based on the insight and

feedback from grassroots workers who are experiencing the issue firsthand (Easterly 16). This

section serves to amplify the struggles of key foster care workers who are feeling under-

supported, and therefore clarify the ways in which building strong communities may be a

solution.

Overworked Social Workers

State social workers are hard-pressed for time and are constantly managing various parts of different cases. In speaking to a current social worker named Angie, she explained that from the day she started, she has never been below 18 cases, and some months she managed between 40-43. When dealing with so many files, it is nearly impossible for social workers to connect with the children and foster parents to ensure their emotional wellbeing. In her closing remarks, Angie stated that "caseworkers don't have the correct number of cases they should have… that's why foster parents are not supported" (Andrews). Although social workers are the connecting piece between the government and caregivers, their workload hinders them from being able to adequately serve foster families, therefore leaving families with improper access to resources.

Difficulties with Parent Visits

In nearly every conversation I have had with foster parents, the caregivers express a distaste about mandated visits with biological parents. Although disliked, parent visits are a crucial part of the foster care system. It allows children and biological parents to connect while also informing the social workers "if the child will eventually be going home or not" (Carmichael). As a result, parent visits must remain. Yet, because of the deep emotional ties, children often enter and leave these visits with a flood of unmanaged emotions. While interviewing foster families, they explained that "visits and phone calls were disasters" and "even when the visit goes well, sometimes it triggers emotions and makes the kids upset" (Downs and Downs; Webb). Other foster caregivers mentioned that "most kids, no matter how horrific their parents are, still want to be with their mom and dad" (Malo). Yet this becomes problematic because once together "a lot of the kids are uncomfortable with their parents" and are more interested in the idea of loving parents than they are their actual parent (Oats). This causes difficulties for foster families as they are the ones held responsible for managing the

emotional outbreaks caused by this confusion and resurfaced trauma. This is an issue because "behavioral problems are central to the demise of foster placements", and if mandated visits are causing behavioral problems, foster parents have little control (Taylor and McQuillan 2). Studies showed that "the issue of visits was considered to be one of the most negative aspects of fostering by 20% of the caregivers surveyed" (Salas et al. 2). Although parent visits are a regular part of a foster child's life, foster parents, especially those licensed through the state, continually appear to be ill-equipped to manage situations revolving around parent visits (Harris). This lack of training leads to disturbances in the home and eventually displacement of a child. If there is to be a change in the foster care system, there needs to be a change in the way foster parents are supported and equipped to deal with trauma-inducing situations.

General Perceptions of Foster Care

Finally, misconceptions about and the reputation of foster care have played a large role in the loss of foster homes. In speaking with the community engagement director for the YMCA's social impact center, she explained that a substantial portion of her role as their foster family recruiter is myth-busting and re-education. She explained that it is "really important to have a whole recruitment plan that speaks to misconceptions. Media usually makes it seem like you are always fostering to adopt" (Senes). If families are entering into foster care with specific expectations, their inability to meet those expectations may contribute to their discontentment once they are a part of the program. If well informed, families would have a better idea of what to expect and therefore would be able to better prepare.

The recent reputation of foster care has also turned potential recruits away. Director Ashly Harris from a private agency, Chance 4 Children, explained that "foster parents are our best recruiters" (Harris). However, if nearly half of foster care placements end in requests for

removal, the foster parents' negative perceptions of foster care will influence the people they are in contact with. If a caregiver, who has received very little support, has a poor experience, it will then discourage others from considering fostering children themselves. This shows how the lack of support for foster parents can lead, and has led to the spiraling downfall of foster care in the State of Washington.

Review of Current Approaches

As this issue has increasingly gained attention, private agencies and nonprofits have worked to offer solutions. By observing the implementation of case managers in private agencies, as well as third party involvement, I will evaluate the current attempts being made to address the foster care crisis. The insight gained will be used to enhance the Foster Pairing method being suggested.

In the private sector, many agencies have created an in-between position known as case managers. This position's main goal is to serve foster families and children by working alongside social workers and families enlisted in their agency. These case managers "oversee meetings, therapy, and extra support" whereas "social workers deal with legal matters" (Borgs). Case managers spend time with each of their assigned kids about once a month and depending on the size of the agency, they usually only work approximately 15 cases at a time. This approach provides foster families with easier access to resources, and it offers foster children stable and consistent connections.

Many foster care organizations have also created programs to help foster children develop under constructive environments. Treehouse is a Seattle Non-profit that has helped foster children access resources needed to advance and thrive. They work directly with older foster kids to build networks of support through clubs and sports teams, while working specifically with caregivers to help the younger children (McBreen). Other organizations have

also developed with similar approaches, but one of the setbacks of this approach is the referral and funding factor. In order to benefit from these organization, social workers need to refer the resource, and foster families need to apply to because the service is limited.

These are two of the most apparent attempts to redefine the experience of foster parents and children in the greater Seattle area. Both have shown positive results and have made a difference in the lives of children. However, as the issue of insufficient beds for foster children has grown, it becomes apparent that, systematically, something must change. The work of a few foster agencies will only help support a few small communities of foster parents, and the resources from non-profits will continually be limited by funding. The lack of support for families must be addressed statewide. This does not mean their attempts are ineffective, it simply means that another approach must be introduced.

Proposal

At the state level, minimal adjustments have been made to make up for the foster care crisis. Foster parents are diminishing, yet they are also the ones with a unique perspective and position that may contribute to the solution. In this section, a service known as Foster Pairing will be proposed to explain how the Washington State Department of Children, Youth and Families Services (DCYF) could build relationships among foster parents, encourage mutual support, and therefore change the trajectory of the current foster care crisis.

Purpose

Relational connection is needed and lacking among members of the foster care system, therefore there are dual purposes behind building communities among these caregivers. The first

is to provide support for foster families through the spread of intimate knowledge and wisdom. The second is the strengthening of foster parents' collective voice so that copowerment, a term that will later be defined, can take place. By building communities, the foster care system will naturally undergo transformation in a way that enables healthier home environments for children in need.

In a study with families who were on the verge of having their children removed from their home, researchers offered in-home therapy to prevent foster care placement. The study lasted for several weeks and in the end, families were asked to explain their experience. The findings showed that families "expressed appreciation for having therapists that they could rely on in times of need", but it was interesting to also find that there was little appreciation for the actual in-home therapy sessions (McWey 9). When translated back to the foster care system, this study shows that at times, the most effective form of support is not the education of practical skill, but instead a connection with another person.

Because of their position, foster parents are the most capable and most influential supporters available to one another. These caregivers interact daily with foster children and are constantly exposed to their needs. Living with children means that "foster parents gain intimate knowledge of children's lives" and can evaluate which approaches work and which ones do not (Shdaimah and Jonas 6). This knowledge is gained through experience and cannot always be taught. Although online resources are available to help foster parents, support is best received when a connection is made. Foster parents have a shared story and the authority to offer insight into issues regarding foster care. If an individual perceives that proposed suggestions "fit with their values and identities, they'll be enthusiastic about incorporating the new structures" (Vogl 22). This is what empowers foster parents to encourage and support one another.

In addition to support, by building communities among foster parents, you strengthen their communal voice and encourage copowerment. Copowerment is a term used to describe practices that strive for mutual growth and the empowerment of all parties involved. In the case of foster care, oftentimes foster parents hold "comprehensive information that they want decision-makers to hear firsthand" (Shdaimah and Jonas 6). Foster families live daily life with foster children and therefore are key resources. But because of the current lack of communal connection, their knowledge and wisdom is not being shared and is sitting idle when it could be empowering other decision makers. When asked, foster parents explained that in potential opportunities, they were "often afraid to, or discouraged from, providing information, or they did not know how or when to speak up" (Shdaimah and Jonas 6). Foster parents are one of the most knowledgeable advocates for foster children because of their experience and exposure. Adhering to their input and encouraging copowerment is therefore crucial to the furthering success of foster care.

In the foster care system, there is a disconnect between state mandates and advice from foster parents. For example, a foster child was being transferred to a special needs education program because he was not adjusting to his current school. When I talked to the foster family, they were convinced that the issue stemmed from constant readjusting to new schools, and not the style of teaching (Jones). The state and foster family had different solutions to the same problem. A lot of times, issues with foster children are a result of under experienced leaders, making under-informed decisions. Therefore, "it's vital to the process of reconciliation" between foster families and the state "to create an atmosphere of safety" where discussions can take place (McNeil 71). By building communities, foster families are offered the safe space to converse about issues and act on their communal findings. This, therefore, engages foster families in

copowerment in a way that all stakeholders offer insight from their strengths and are supported

in their weaknesses. By creating communal spaces for foster parents to raise their voices,

necessary suggestions will surface and will eventually aid in producing lasting improvements in

the foster care system.

Approach: Fostering Pairing

For communities of foster parents to develop and for families to build relationships, there

must be a structure in place to support it, such as Foster Pairing. Foster Pairing would be a

system managed by DCYF that would connect foster parents to other members in their

community who are also fostering a child. The mission of Foster Pairing would be to inspire

foster families to build networks of connection and then work in unison with others to address

the difficulties associated with fostering a child.

Focusing on one county at a time, the DCYF will introduce Foster Pairing through

newsletters that explain the purpose and mission. After that, families in the foster care system

will be paired up with others in their communities to establish Foster Together groups. These

groups are designed to help foster families grow familiar with others near them who are also

experiencing the weight of the foster care system. As new families get licensed to foster, they

will get connected to the existing Foster Together groups living in their community, therefore

offering them immediate support as they begin the new process of housing and caring for a foster

child. The Foster Together groups would be identified and regulated through an online platform.

The platform would allow foster families to log in and connect with other foster families in their

region.

A key element to Foster Pairing would be the structure of the program. Once Foster

Together groups are established, they are encouraged to view the other members as team players

in their foster care experience. Foster Together groups are also encouraged to establish regular meeting places, whether it be an hour-long online group call, or a weekly park meet up. The purpose of this is to create consistency and assurance that connections will continue to grow on a weekly basis. This part of the process would be self-regulated by the members in the Foster Together group. This is a critical part of the process because rituals and temples are two of the key principles behind strong communities. Rituals are any behaviors that are done as a collective group that aligns with the values of each member, and similarly, "any space can be made a temple by members gathering there and enacting rituals" (Vogl 67). By building consistencies, in the times and location, foster families begin to build connections with one another and develop natural relationships.

To develop consistent rituals among Foster Together groups, the DCYF would also provide discussion topics based on the framework of Developmental Assets. The usage of Developmental Assets has recently been growing in popularity as a mechanism to improve the holistic wellbeing of individuals. Developmental Assets are "building blocks that young people need in their lives to grow up successfully" and the framework is broken down into 40 assets distributed between 8 Internal and external categories (Benson 59). These categories include support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, constructive use of time, commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity (Benson 76). By evaluating the assets in each of these categories, foster families will be able to discuss the ways in which they could continue to support the children in their care. Research has also shown that the "level of developmental assets explains students' success two times more powerfully than do the demographic factors of socioeconomic status, race and ethnicity, gender, or family composition" (Benson 89). Therefore, encouraging foster families to address the deficiency of specific assets

not only supports them as caregivers in building relational connections, but it also informs them of how they could be supporting the children they are fostering.

In order for Foster Pairing to operate as a new branch of DCYF, new staff must be recruited to manage the connecting and distribution of discussion content. This proposal, however, does not assume more responsibility for social workers, and instead embraces the natural strengths of foster families and encourages their development. The Washington state welfare system is harming foster families by expecting them to manage foster care on their own. In fact, the problems worsen when individual foster families assume they are, or should be, self-sufficient (Katongole and Rice 29). In order for the narrative of foster families to change, fostering children must happen in communities of mutual support (Brown 3). Washington is currently experiencing a crisis, and to effectively fix the issue, a solution must address the roots.

Evaluation

To ensure the success of this program, evaluation will also need to take place. Here I will offer a brief explanation of the practices that will be used to assess the Foster Pairing program for effectiveness. A more in-depth explanation of the evaluation processes will be offered later in Essay 2. To gauge the impact of the proposed program, two levels evaluation will take place. For immediate accountability, a Logical Framework will be used to measure the outcomes of Foster Pairing in comparison to the set goal. Secondly a longitudinal study will also be used to understand how children will or will not benefit from the changes made as a result of Foster Pairing. Through evaluation, the program will be further refined to meet the needs of the foster care community.

Conclusion

By helping foster families access proper support, the DCYF will begin to see a shift in the reputation of foster care, the number of families involved in the system, and the number of children being cared for. Support for foster parents is lacking, and the growing gap between the number of licensed foster families and children in need of placements is a clear indication of this issue. Social workers are overburdened and incapable of offering needed support. Nonprofits are limited by funding and private agencies are limited in reach. Therefore, the State must step in to address this foster care crisis. Foster Pairing is a proposed approach for the DCYF to nurture communities of foster families and to encourage them to pool their collective knowledge to address the behavioral difficulties that come from being a foster parent. The children in Washington are in desperate need of foster placements, and if the state does not take action, the number of children sleeping in offices, hotels, and homeless shelters will only increase. Support for foster parents must be implemented, and it must address their current needs. The answer is community.

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APPENDIX B:

Search INSTITUTE ❯ **40 Developmental Assets® for Middle Childhood (ages 8-12)**

Search Institute® has identified the following building blocks of healthy development—known as **Developmental Assets®**—that help young people grow up healthy, caring, and responsible.

External Assets

Support
1. **Family support**—Family life provides high levels of love and support.
2. **Positive family communication**—Parent(s) and child communicate positively. Child feels comfortable seeking advice and counsel from parent(s).
3. **Other adult relationships**—Child receives support from adults other than her or his parent(s).
4. **Caring neighborhood**—Child experiences caring neighbors.
5. **Caring school climate**—Relationships with teachers and peers provide a caring, encouraging environment.
6. **Parent involvement in schooling**—Parent(s) are actively involved in helping the child succeed in school.

Empowerment
7. **Community values youth**—Child feels valued and appreciated by adults in the community.
8. **Children as resources**—Child is included in decisions at home and in the community.
9. **Service to others**—Child has opportunities to help others in the community.
10. **Safety**—Child feels safe at home, at school, and in his or her neighborhood.

Boundaries & Expectations
11. **Family boundaries**—Family has clear and consistent rules and consequences and monitors the child's whereabouts.
12. **School Boundaries**—School provides clear rules and consequences.
13. **Neighborhood boundaries**—Neighbors take responsibility for monitoring the child's behavior.
14. **Adult role models**—Parent(s) and other adults in the child's family, as well as nonfamily adults, model positive, responsible behavior.
15. **Positive peer influence**—Child's closest friends model positive, responsible behavior.
16. **High expectations**—Parent(s) and teachers expect the child to do her or his best at school and in other activities.

Constructive Use of Time
17. **Creative activities**—Child participates in music, art, drama, or creative writing two or more times per week.
18. **Child programs**—Child participates two or more times per week in cocurricular school activities or structured community programs for children..
19. **Religious community**—Child attends religious programs or services one or more times per week.
20. **Time at home**—Child spends some time most days both in high-quality interaction with parents and doing things at home other than watching TV or playing video games.

Internal Assets

Commitment to Learning
21. **Achievement Motivation**—Child is motivated and strives to do well in school.
22. **Learning Engagement**—Child is responsive, attentive, and actively engaged in learning at school and enjoys participating in learning activities outside of school.
23. **Homework**—Child usually hands in homework on time.
24. **Bonding to school**—Child cares about teachers and other adults at school.
25. **Reading for Pleasure**—Child enjoys and engages in reading for fun most days of the week.

Positive Values
26. **Caring**—Parent(s) tell the child it is important to help other people.
27. **Equality and social justice**—Parent(s) tell the child it is important to speak up for equal rights for all people.
28. **Integrity**—Parent(s) tell the child it is important to stand up for one's beliefs.
29. **Honesty**—Parent(s) tell the child it is important to tell the truth.
30. **Responsibility**—Parent(s) tell the child it is important to accept personal responsibility for behavior.
31. **Healthy Lifestyle**—Parent(s) tell the child it is important to have good health habits and an understanding of healthy sexuality.

Social Competencies
32. **Planning and decision making**—Child thinks about decisions and is usually happy with results of her or his decisions.
33. **Interpersonal Competence**—Child cares about and is affected by other people's feelings, enjoys making friends, and, when frustrated or angry, tries to calm her- or himself.
34. **Cultural Competence**—Child knows and is comfortable with people of different racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds and with her or his own cultural identity.
35. **Resistance skills**—Child can stay away from people who are likely to get her or him in trouble and is able to say no to doing wrong or dangerous things.
36. **Peaceful conflict resolution**—Child seeks to resolve conflict nonviolently.

Positive Identity
37. **Personal power**—Child feels he or she has some influence over things that happen in her or his life.
38. **Self-esteem**—Child likes and is proud to be the person that he or she is.
39. **Sense of purpose**—Child sometimes thinks about what life means and whether there is a purpose for her or his life.
40. **Positive view of personal future**—Child is optimistic about her or his personal future.

APPENDIX C:

LOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Design a project by identifying how resources and activities contribute to project goals

	DESCRIPTION	INDICATORS	MEANS OF VERIFICATION	ASSUMPTIONS
Goal				
Outcomes				
Outputs				
Activities				

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