

AN EXPLORATION OF FOSTER CARE GROUP HOMES THROUGH  
THE PERSPECTIVES OF SOCIAL WORK PROFESSIONALS

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## Abstract

Foster care group homes are often looked upon as a negative option for children in the foster care system. This thesis will use three types of knowledge: factual, theoretical, and practice, to gain an understanding of foster care group homes through the perspectives of social work professionals. Information will be gathered through a literature review as well as through qualitative interviews. The purpose of this thesis is to gain further knowledge on a subject of critical importance to the profession of social work and to the field of child welfare.

## Acknowledgments

The process of writing this thesis has been long and challenging. Its completion would not have been possible without the help of my sensible supervisor. This thesis started off the way that most things start off: with a vague, largely optimistic idea. In this case, the idea was that I would design a non-profit children's shelter specifically structured for youth who had been abused within the foster care system. This thesis was going to explore the successes and failures of not only the child welfare system in the United States, but also child welfare systems world-wide to in order to deduce the flaws of these systems as a whole, so that I could design the perfect shelter within these limits. I was going to get to the root of all suffering within group homes. I was going to fix the foster care system! All of this as a nineteen year old undergraduate student at Texas State with a timeline of less than a year.

It did not take long to realize that this was not possible. With the guidance of my supervisor, Dr. Catherine Hawkins, I was able to narrow the scope of my topic into something both achievable and valuable to my learning. I thank her for all of the support and time spent on this project.

Additionally, I would like to give thanks to all of the professionals who took time out of their day to interview and advise me on my topic. I would like to thank The Settlement Home for Children and The Greater San Marcos Youth Council for allowing me to glimpse parts of their facilities.

I am so thankful for my friends and family, my parents in particular, who loved and supported me through this process, even when I was at my most stressed and irritable. This thesis would not have been achievable without you.

An Exploration of Foster Care Group Homes through  
the Perspectives of Social Work Professionals

**INTRODUCTION**

**Historical Background**

The housing of youth in group settings in America can be found as far back as the 17<sup>th</sup> century where children were housed in orphanages and poor houses (as cited in Brown, McCauley, Navita, & Saxe, 2013). In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, this model of care began to evolve towards the more current model of residential treatment and group home care which aimed to provide a more treatment based level of care rather than simple supervision (Brown, McCauley, Navita, & Saxe, 2013). This, combined with the deinstitutionalization movements of the 70's and 80's, helped to create the foundation for group homes today. These modern day entities were designed to provide therapy, assistance, and care to youth experiencing emotional and behavioral problems while maintaining a sense of normalcy not found in psychiatric wards. Today, "forty-four of the fifty U.S. states, Washington, DC, and U.S. Virgin Islands include group care as part of their child welfare array of out-of-home placement options" (Chow et al, 2014). Recently, however, group homes have come under increasing scrutiny and are often perceived as a negative option for children in the foster care system. Many critics believe that these entities as a whole have failed to provide children with the sense of normalcy, safety, and care as intended.

**Conceptual Framework**

Social work is a values based profession that emphasizes different kinds of knowledge and skills for practice (Cha, Kuo, & Marsh, 2006; Trevithick, 2008).

Trevithick's model is based on the idea that knowledge is multifaceted and can be divided into factual knowledge, theoretical knowledge, and practice knowledge, as shown in Figure 1. According to Trevithick (2008), these "three types of knowledge...overlap and interweave in intricate ways and include the knowledge that all parties bring to the work."

The factual knowledge section can be broken down into five subcategories. These categories include, law and legislation, social policy, agency policy and procedures, information on groups of people, and information relating to social problems.

These five subcategories will be used to organize the information in both the literature review and interview section (See Figure 2). The "law and legislation" subcategory will detail the direct federal and state regulations which affect foster care group homes. The "social policy" subcategory will look at some of the current social policies which affect foster care group homes such as the allocation of resources, education, and other services in child welfare but which are separate from the specific policies created by agencies. To discuss "agency policy and procedures," this thesis will look at best practice suggestions found in the literature within the scope of general laws and legislation and social policy. The "information on groups of people" portion will describe patterns of race, age, and disabilities of those persons placed in foster care group homes. This section will provide a "general picture of the trends in life opportunities and vulnerability to adversity that different groups may experience and their location in the social structure" (Trevithick, 2008). The "information relating to social problems" subcategory will explore knowledge relating to specific social problems. These issues

may include topics like homelessness, depression, and other issues which are “the result of adversity or the long-term impact of deprivation and disadvantage” (Trevithick, 2008).

The theoretical knowledge section can be further broken down into three categories as shown in figure 3. These include: theories that further our understanding of people, situations, and events; theories that analyze the role of social work in situations and theories which relate to direct practice. First, theories which increase our knowledge of people can be drawn from a variety of disciplines. For the purpose of this thesis, most theories utilized will be based on social work or sociology. Second, theories that analyze the role of social work in institutions will look at the effect of social work on this portion of the foster care system and will explore the topic of reform vs. revolution. Trevithick (2008) encourages the question, “should [social work] ‘fit’ people into the system, change the system—or both?” Third, theories related directly to practice will focus on best practice methods and what changes need to be enacted to better suit the specific system.

The practice knowledge section can be described as “knowledge and life experience that practitioners have acquired” (Trevithick, 2008). This section entails three types of knowledge: acquisition, use, and creation (see Figure 4). It will be used to explore how the subject of foster care group homes has been conceptualized through the perspectives of working professionals. Practice knowledge is best illustrated in the interview section of this thesis.

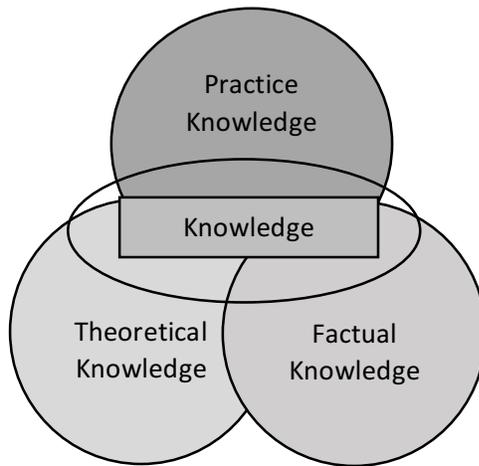


Figure 1. Knowledge framework. Trevithick (2008), p. 1217.

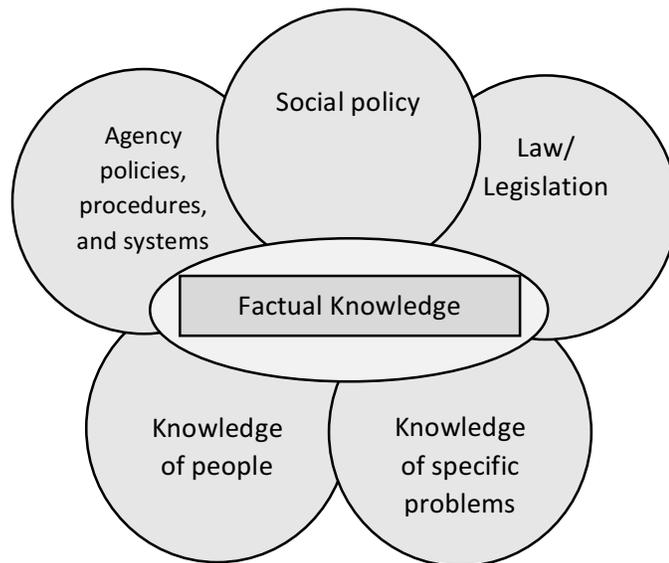


Figure 2. Factual knowledge. From Trevithick (2008), p. 1223.

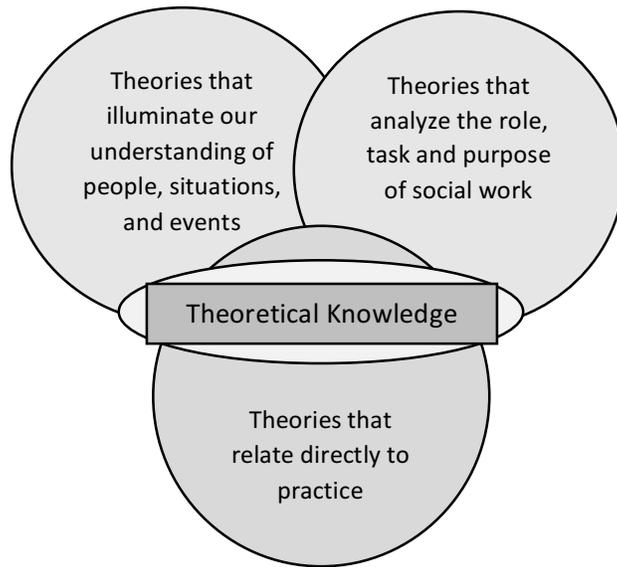


Figure 3. Theoretical knowledge. From Trevithick (2008), p. 1218.

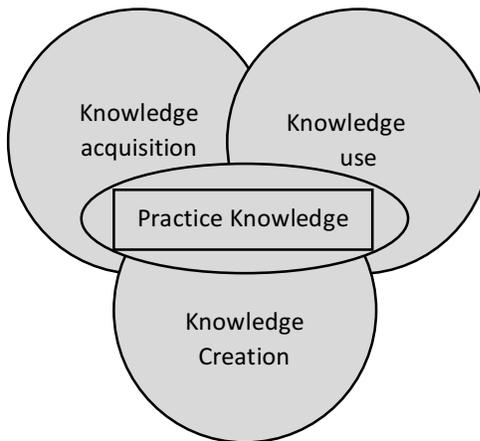


Figure 4. Practice knowledge. From Trevithick (2008), p. 1227.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the subject of foster care group homes through three types of knowledge (factual, practice, and theoretical) in order to obtain a foundation of understanding for the authors future professional career.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Terminology

Due to the different facets and opinions surrounding abuse, neglect, youth, non-profit, and other terms, there is a lack of common acceptance surrounding their definitions. “One challenge to studying group home care lies in the lack of consensus on what constitutes group home care for youth in the USA” (Chow et al, 2014). For this thesis, terms will be defined as follows.

A **Child** is any youth under the age of eighteen. In the United States child welfare system, children can be wards of the state up until the age of eighteen at which time they will age out of the system.

**Child Abuse**, as defined by Federal Legislation, is “any recent act on the part of a parent or caretaker which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation, or an act which presents an imminent risk of serious harm” (Definitions of child abuse and neglect in Federal Law, 2015). This definition is kept purposely vague in order to ensure that all types of abuse can be included rather than listing specific acts.

**Child Neglect** is similarly defined by Federal Legislation as “any recent failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation, or any failure to act which presents an imminent risk of serious harm” (Definitions of child abuse and neglect in federal law 2015). This definition is also kept purposely vague for the same reasons.

**Foster Care** is “24-hour substitute care for children placed away from their parents or guardians and for whom the State agency has placement and care responsibility” (Johnson, 2004). Foster care is not limited to the traditional two foster

parent home. It can also encompass placements in kinship care, traditional foster parent homes, residential centers and group homes, institutions, emergency shelters, and pre-adoptive homes. Caregivers do not have to be licensed to qualify under these definitions and do not necessarily have to receive governmental payments (Johnson, 2004).

**Foster Family Homes** are “traditional foster homes that contain one to six children” (Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, 2014). Foster family homes are inspected by the state and caregivers receive training and financial support (M.D. v. Perry, 2015).

A **Group Home** contains seven to twelve children but are otherwise almost identical to foster family homes in regards to minimum requirements (Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, 2014). Due to the nature of the types of clients group homes are designed to serve, additional training can be required of caregivers in order to qualify as a therapeutic setting. Unlike larger settings, foster care group homes are not required to maintain awake-night supervision (M.D. vs. Perry, 2015).

**Kinship Care** is "the full-time care, nurturing, and protection of a child by relatives, members of their tribe or clan, godparents, stepparents, or other adults who have a family relationship to a child" (Definitions and Language of Kinship Care, 2015). The relationship of this caretaker to the child does not have to be that of blood relation. This relationship can be based on cultural ties, unofficial family ties, and/or emotional ties.

**Learned Helplessness** is the result of “learning that occurs in an environment that is uncontrollable” which teaches individuals that their responses to situations do not affect the overall outcome (Gomez, Ryan, Norton, Jones, & Galan-Cisneros, 2015). This

idea of learned helplessness is highly prevalent amongst foster care youth and has been shown to negatively affect later adult outcomes.

**Residential Care Facilities** can range from large institutionally based facilities that provide extensive services (such as teen-parenting classes, mental health treatment, and substance abuse treatment) to smaller more homelike environments which could incorporate structures such as a house parent (Group Homes, 2007). Facilities of this nature must be able to house at least 13 children and adhere to extensive regulation. These definitions of residential care facilities exclude training schools and detention facilities (Group and Residential Care, 2015).

## **Factual Knowledge**

### **Law and Legislation**

The foster care system is governed by a vast set of rules and regulations both at the federal and state levels. Governmental regulation first began in 1961, when foster care was added to the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program, continued after the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act (AACWA) in 1980, and remains today as the foundation for foster care standards (Scott, 2013). These regulations include information on health care, permanency, termination of parental rights, and finances. Further regulations are enacted by the state. These include standards for licensure, staffing, allocation of funds, record keeping, and technology. In Texas, in order to open and operate a group home, one must first obtain a permit to operate. Once this is obtained, policies must be created regarding staffing procedures, organizational plans, finances, and plans of care. This includes background checks on employees, a 12-month budget on income expenses, and methods of reporting (Texas Department of Family and

Protective Services, 2014). Current documents for all children must be kept on site in addition to case records and information about special needs. To provide therapeutic treatment at these facilities, there must be a treatment director on staff who is “Licensed as a psychiatrist, psychologist, professional counselor, clinical social worker, marriage and family therapist, or registered nurse; or [is] Certified by the Texas Education Agency as an education diagnostician, have a master’s degree in special education or a human services field, and have three years of experience working with children with mental retardation or a pervasive developmental disorder” (Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, 2014). Group homes are not required under the law to provide this type of treatment within their facilities. If not seeking to provide this aspect of service, as long as minimum licensing requirements are met and a permit to operate is obtained, anyone can open a group home regardless of prior experience or education in a social service field.

### **Social Policy**

In addition to governmental rules and regulations, there are several social policies which affect the allocation of resources, education, and other services related to child welfare. Within the literature, one of the main social policy concerns in foster care group homes is the quality of education for children in these placements. According to Bingham (2003), the annual cost of housing and education for foster care youth can range from \$65,000 to \$150,000, yet there are consistently poor educational outcomes for youth in the child welfare system. Kagan (2013) states, “Children in child welfare programs have evidenced a high rate of developmental impairment including delays in receptive language, expressive language, fine motor skills, sequential processing, visual processing,

inattention, and memory.” In 2003, thirty-seven percent of foster care youth never finished high school, thirty-nine percent were unemployed, twenty-seven percent of males and ten percent of females had experienced at least one incarceration, and thirty-nine percent relied on public assistance (Bingham, 2003). After aging out of the system at eighteen years old, many youth chose not to complete their high school education. Those still in the system are often required to repeat courses due to the frequency with which they might change placements and schools (Bingham, 2003). A lack of universalized criteria throughout states and policies which do not allow for the transfer of partial credit are particularly damaging to youth re-placed in the middle of a semester. Charter schools have been found to be more accommodating of this population's special needs but can result in a sense of isolation and a lack of normalcy in a child's life (Bingham, 2003).

### **Agency Policy and Procedures**

Group homes are unique in both their structure and purpose. The ways in which these agencies operate can either help or severely hinder a child's likelihood for future success. Despite having a general lack of scientific and research-based studies on group homes, the literature has pointed to a few best practice techniques to better serve this population. These factors include environment, training, trauma-informed interventions, staff support and self-care practices, integration of services, program culture, and validation (Hodgdon, Kinniburgh, Gabowitz, Blaustein, & Spinazzola, 2013).

Environment refers to a trauma-informed treatment setting with an emphasis on safety. Training for staff on the impacts of trauma on development and behavior are essential to providing the best direct care for youth in this population. Staff-support and self-care are important in reducing stress, second-hand PTSD symptoms, and turnover.

The integration of services is key in reducing fragmentation between programs. This is a particularly important aspect of care when considering that clients have so often experienced high levels of fragmentation within both their home lives and the child welfare system. Program culture can severely help or hinder a child's healing process, so programs must be well-informed and understand client behaviors. Lastly, creating a validating environment where the youth and staff alike can feel validated and safe is most critical in predicting the success of care and retention within placements (Hodgdon, Kinniburgh, Gabowitz, Blaustein, & Spinazzola, 2013).

Without the successful implementation of these factors, the chances for client happiness and success are reduced exponentially. For example, a dark and dreary environment would not feel safe or reminiscent of a healthy home. This could be detrimental to a child's feeling of security. Similarly, in regards to trauma-informed interventions and staff training, a child who has been the victim of physical, sexual, and/or emotional abuse may exhibit aggressive behaviors, difficulty interacting socially, and/or a lack of coping skills (Deutsch et al., 2015). Caretakers unaware of the effects of trauma on behavior might think this child is simply "bad" and may react to this negatively. With trauma-informed care, caretakers are informed enough to attend to the unique developmental and cultural issues in children who have experienced trauma that can impact symptom severity (Kagan & Spinazzola, 2013). Unfortunately, although it is clear that all of these methods of practice are important to group home success, many advocates contend that "that service use is unlikely to be coordinated nor tailored to addressing young people's multiple psycho-social challenges simultaneously" (Ungar, Liebenberg, & Ikeda, 2014).

## **Information on Groups of People**

Youth in foster care are more likely than their peers to have experienced high levels of exposure to trauma. Youth in residential centers and group homes are even more likely to have witnessed or experienced sexual abuse, physical abuse, neglect, and community violence (e.g., beatings, stabbings, or killings) (Brown, McCauley, Navalta, & Saxe, 2013; Habib, Labruna, & Newman, 2013; Knoverek, Briggs, Underwood, Hartman, 2013). It is recognized throughout the literature that youth who have experience trauma or witnessed violent acts are at a higher risk of developing a “multitude of lasting difficulties across many domains of functioning” (Habib, Labruna, & Newman, 2013). These difficulties can be emotional, behavioral, interpersonal, or a combination. (Megahead, & Soliday, 2013). These may include a mental health diagnosis of mood disorders (e.g., bipolar disorder and/or depressive disorder); disruptive behavior disorders such as conduct disorders, hyperactivity disorders, and/or anxiety disorders (e.g. separation disorders, social anxiety disorders, or generalized anxiety disorders); eating disorders (e.g., bulimia or anorexia); and, posttraumatic stress disorder (Chow et al, 2014; Deutsch, Lynch, Zlotnik, Matone, Kreider, & Noonan, 2015).

There is an urgent need for more research in the complex issue of trauma-informed care. The literature suggest that youth in residential care and group homes appear to show a higher degree of symptoms and functional impairment than those similarly traumatized youth who are not placed in these settings (Habib, Labruna, & Newman, 2013). While residential centers and group homes were designed to care for those with a higher degree of emotional and behavioral issues, the literature suggests that group home placement “may benefit some youth but not others, particularly girls and

younger children with lower initial level of need” (Chow et al, 2014). For this reason, it is important for not only the youth being served but also for youth-serving government agencies, advocates, and families that researchers begin identifying for which populations group home placement is most effective (Chow et al, 2014).

### **Information Relating to Social Problems**

“In 2011 345,958 children resided in foster care nationally” (Gomez, Ryan, Norton, Jones, & Galán-Cisneros, 2015). Within foster care, many children experience a lack of permanency in both placements and caregivers within these placements. “The inability to achieve permanency exposes [these children] to numerous risks including: placement instability, mental and behavior health concerns, physical health challenges, insecure attachments, disrupted relationships, social stigma and isolation, further abuse, and educational instability” (Gomez, Ryan, Norton, Jones, & Galán-Cisneros, 2015). These behavioral health concerns come with numerous stressors which can impact a variety of systems in a child’s life. Studies have proven that difficulties relating to a child’s mental health and behavior act as barriers to successful fostering (Scott, Lee, Harrell, & Smith-West, 2013; Megahead, & Soliday, 2013). Additional stressors include a negative perception of agency or parenting competence, problems with authority, and the bureaucratic nature of the child welfare system (Megahead, & Soliday, 2013). Lack of available caseworkers due to negative perceptions and low pay has led to a gap in service provisions for youth with caseworkers who have caseloads exceeding the intended limit. Similarly, a lack of available placement options has led to children being placed in non-therapeutic group home settings which have been reported to yield a higher likelihood for safety incidents (M.D. vs. Perry, 2015). According to Habib, Labruna, and Newman,

(2013), a huge problem in the child welfare system is the lack of development, delivery, and evaluation of trauma-informed and therapeutic interventions within group homes and residential settings. Without more research and useful data, it will be difficult to close the gaps reported within these settings.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Design**

Since the purpose of this thesis is to gain knowledge on foster care group homes through the varying perspectives of working professionals, the primary method for gaining information was qualitative. This approach to studying a topic is widely used in social work and is very flexible. Part of the interview process involved modifying questions to match the emerging themes of the topic. Initial interviews were semi-structured and focused more on the organizational structure of foster care residential facilities and group homes. Later interviews evolved into an open-ended question and answer format with no specific structure. Interviews were face-to-face and lasted about one hour. They were conducted over the span of five months and were kept within the greater Austin-San Marcos area for logistical purposes. Interviews were recorded with hand written notes and will be paraphrased rather than directly quoted in this thesis.

### **Sample**

The sample was selected through the basis of convenience, willingness to participate, and institutional review board (IRB) standards. Participation was limited to working professionals rather than child welfare youth due to the sensitive nature of the topic and potential risks. The participants were working professionals, who had knowledge or experience working in the child welfare system, residential facilities, or group homes, and who had at least a bachelor's degree level of education. The interview participants were working professionals in the greater Austin-San Marcos area with knowledge of or experience with the child welfare system. The sample was recruited through direct email or phone contact. There was a total of ten professionals (two men

and eight women) who participated in the interviewing process. Interview participants worked in a variety of settings and were as follows (in alphabetical order):

- Tym Belseth- Foster Care Advocate and Department of Family and Protective Services Worker
- Judith Burns, LCSW- Adjunct Faculty for the School of Social Work at Texas State University
- Dr. Nancy Chavkin- Regents Professor for the School of Social Work and Director of the Center for Children and Families at Texas State University
- Jacob Huereca- Operations Director at The Settlement Home for Children in Austin
- Dr. Karen Knox, LCSW- Professor and Interim Director for the School of Social Work at Texas State University
- Dr. Christine Norton, LCSW- Associate Professor for the School of Social Work and Head of the Foster Care Alumni Creating Educational Success (FACES) Program at Texas State University
- Julia Ramsey-New -Director of the Greater San Marcos Youth Council
- Lisa Rogers, LMSW- Adjunct Faculty for the School of Social Work at Texas State University
- Rhonda Smith, LMSW- Grant Specialist/Adjunct Faculty for the School of Social Work at Texas State University
- Martha Wildberger, LCSW- Grant Specialist/Adjunct Faculty for the School of Social Work at Texas State University

For more information about Texas State University visit: <http://www.txstate.edu/>

For more information about The Settlement Home visit:

<https://www.settlementhome.org/>

For information about the Greater San Marcos Youth Council visit: <http://gsmc.org/>

## **FINDINGS**

In a qualitative approach, narrative content is analyzed for major themes. When reflecting on the interviews, two themes emerged. The first theme pertained to “positive” comments about foster care group homes, such as what they should look like according to their intended purpose. The second theme pertained to “negative” comments regarding the perceived reality of foster care group homes and the disconnect from the intended ideal.

Within these two main themes, several subthemes emerge. To keep topics consistent throughout this paper, I use the five subthemes found in factual knowledge section of the conceptual framework to report the different subthemes here. The subthemes are: 1) law and legislation, 2) social policy, 3) agency policy and procedures, 4) information on groups of people, and 5) information relating to social problems (see Figure 2). The bulleted points below represent paraphrased responses based on notes taken during the interviews. These points reflect the opinions stated by interviewed professionals and have been divided into the different subcategories according to relevant content. In order to protect confidentiality, comments are not linked to specific participants.

### **Themes**

Two themes emerged from the analysis of interview responses. These are:

1. The residential facility and group home ideal (positive)
2. The perceived reality of residential facilities and group homes (negative)

### **Subthemes-Positive**

The phrases below represent perceptions on subthemes in relation to the first emerging theme: the ideal of foster care group homes and their intended purpose as perceived by social work professionals (positive).

1) Law and legislation

- *Licensure is required and checks can be unannounced.*
- *Children of different ages are not allowed to sleep in a room together.*
- *Boys and girls must have separate bedrooms.*

2) Social policy

- *Some children have had a very negative experience in the public school system. On top of having experienced trauma within their family systems and through the process of being removed, many experience trauma in the form of bullying. This is why charter schools on cite can be beneficial.*
- *This more controlled setting can be good for those with special education or disciplinary needs.*
- *Money is raised mainly by service contracts with the government. The rest is made up through fundraisers, private donations, and grants. This allows for some financial stability. Additionally, funds are monitored and clearly show that the money is being used on the children.*

3) Agency policy and procedures

- *Staffing in these facilities are trained to provide assessments, monitor medication, and provide regular care.*

- *Multiple staffing. This can allow for 24 hour a day awake care.*
- *Many of these facilities provide prevention and intervention programs to parents. The goal is reunification. Sometimes that is not possible but we really do want the child to be able to stay with their family.*
- *Kids can stay for a range of time; however long they need to.*
- *They can go on unaccompanied walks, they can get a job, and they can go to public school if they want.*
- *We utilize a house parent model with a full time therapist.*
- *The facilities are nice. They have a track, a field, a basketball court.*

#### 4) Information on groups of people

- *Some children are not ready for the intimacy that comes with traditional foster homes. They may need a transition between the highly controlled residential care facilities and the looser traditional home structure.*
- *Group homes and residential treatment facilities are designed for those with my emotional and behavioral issues and should have a more therapeutic focus.*
- *Group homes are for those who have been to residential treatment and have been treated but still need adjusting. When properly executed, group homes can be great for that.*
- *Severe mental and behavioral issues.*

#### 5) Information relating to social problems

- *There are not enough foster parents to provide homes to the number of kids in the system. Group homes are a place for them to go.*
- *Sometimes in other forms of care, specifically kinship care, homes have not been properly vetted. The child will likely encounter his or her abuser.*
- *Additionally, money is given in the form of a stipend rather than goods. This money can be used on anything whether or not it relates to the child.*

### **Subthemes-Negative**

The phrases below represent perceptions on subthemes in relation to the second emerging theme, which is how foster care group homes are actually perceived by social work professionals (negative).

#### 1) Law and legislation

- *We have tons of regulations... binders full. That's what's hard about taking government dollars. There are so many strings attached. The state is a challenging place to work. With the bureaucracy it takes so long to get anything done.*
- *There are so many rules that it dissuades people from being foster parents. The rules are so extreme. They are not allowed to discipline their kids but kids need discipline sometimes. They need to have some consequences for their actions.*
- *Licensing gets bogged down in the letter of the law.*

- *Normal kids get in a fight with their siblings get grounded. Foster kids get arrested. This goes on their record. This impacts their future.*
- *Practically anyone can open a group home as long as they meet the licensure requirements.*
- *Any joe-schmoe can open a group home.*

## 2) Social policy

- *The worst are those with built in charter schools. The use of those on ground or smaller schools eliminate the need for contact with the outside world, fully cementing their isolation.*
- *Some CEO's in these congregate care places are making 60, 70, 80 thousand dollars.*
- *It's basically jail. Why are the victims being treated like prisoners?*
- *These facilities are internment camps.*
- *It's a place to warehouse kids.*

## 3) Agency policy and procedures

- *A mistake means total isolation... of the entire group. Like if one time in 2006 a kid used their cell phone to call a friend from school and they ended up smoking a joint on the lawn... the new rule will be that no cell phones are allowed at the facility ever for any kid.*
- *Kids in group homes are not allowed to do anything. I spoke to a youth once who said she didn't know how to do her own dishes because someone always just did them for her. This lack of learning can result in a phenomena know as learned helplessness. Kids are told they can't*

*do anything so they don't know how. They never learn how so they don't believe they can.*

#### 4) Information on groups of people

- *Teenagers are the primary placements in group homes. Many end up aging out of the system.*
- *There is so much disproportionality in foster care, specifically in group homes. This is with the LGBTQ community as well as with minorities.*
- *When kids have a bad experience with foster care, they are so much less likely to utilize foster care services, even the ones that benefit them.*
- *It doesn't matter if the caregiver isn't taking care of the kid for the money. What matters is that the kids feels that way.*
- *If a kid is having a bad experience they are more likely to run away*
- *They are safe but they are not happy. There's a difference.*
- *Foster care teaches youth to be good children. It doesn't teach them how to be adults. How can you expect a person to be a high functioning adult if he was never able to experience being a teenager? In foster care you're not allowed to experience that trial and error.*
- *Foster care group homes lack normalcy for youth in their care. This lack of normalcy has long lasting consequences on youth outcomes.*

#### 5) Information relating to social problems

- *Congregate care is less efficient at providing good experiences than kinship and traditional foster care.*
- *Many of the people who work in the child welfare system don't view kids for what they are: kids. They view them as clients.*
- *Foster care in and of itself is not ideal. The ideal would be that the kids stay with their family. That cannot always happen. The next best would be that they get adopted. After that, placed in as close to a "normal" setting as possible. Group homes, by nature are not a normal setting.*
- *We surveyed homeless youth... 50% had previously been in foster care. This is disproportionately high... incredibly so.*
- *Something is wrong with interventions at all levels.*
- *Due to the lack of available foster parents, group homes become a melting pot as opposed to having separation. You can't possibly meet the needs of all kids in this melting pot system.*
- *There are the kids on one end of the spectrum, those who have actual mental disorders, getting one half of the attention and kids on the other end, those who act out in their trauma but aren't mentally problematic, getting the other half. What about all of those in the middle?*

## **DISCUSSION**

This section will combine factual, theoretical, and practice knowledge to discuss information learned in the process of completing this thesis. In analyzing both the literature review and the interview responses, I have found several gaps which have affected the ways in which professionals view foster care group homes. As the qualitative findings reveal, while it appears the ideal of foster care group homes is fairly well received when utilized as a therapeutic setting, many scholars and professionals alike seem to believe that the reality of these placements is lacking both in safety and in therapeutic success. To further explain these gaps, information will be broken down into the three focus points of theoretical knowledge shown in Figure 3. Because this thesis is exploratory and for the purpose of personal growth, the discussion will be an interpretation of what I, as the researcher, deduced from the literature and the interviews. As such, the findings may not be generalizable to group homes or other professional opinions.

### **Theories Relating to the Role of Social Work**

Key theories used in social work practice include the systems theory, social learning theory, psychosocial development theory, empowerment theories, and conflict theories (Hutchison, 2013). Social workers use these theories to guide practice, including assessment, intervention, and evaluation of clients. Many of these theories stem largely from the basis that people's actions and decisions are oftentimes influenced by their environment. While these theories are relevant for all clients, it is especially important to consider their applicability when working with children placed in the foster care system. Depending on certain developmental factors, resources, and available interventions,

different placement options may or may not be effective for meeting a child's particular needs. It is imperative that social workers look at both the individual client and the details of a placement option before placing a child.

Foster care group homes, in particular, are very unique placement options in the sense that their structure and restrictions are so varied within the child welfare system. Where other entities such as traditional foster care homes or residential treatment facilities oftentimes conjure a generally clear and widely accepted picture, group homes are much more complex. From the official title of this placement option to the justification of its use, there appears to be a lack of consensus, even among academics, about how a group home is supposed to be operated. Although the federal guidelines do explicitly state the very minimum standards required in order to receive the licensure and title of a foster care group home, they do little else to regulate the types of interventions utilized within these homes. As one professional said, "Practically anyone can open up a group home as long as they meet the licensure requirements." Although there are more regulations for group homes which operate under a therapeutic intervention model, the basic requirements for a group home are quite similar to a traditional foster home setting despite differing number of children. As a result the continuum of care in group homes is very broad and disjointed. They range from what seems to be, at minimum, a traditional style foster home with an excess of children to a small residential treatment style therapeutic setting complete with on-site counselors and paid employees.

This lack of uniformity has proved to be challenging to social workers trying to utilize this service for clients and has had great influence on their perception of these homes. Within the interviews, the most opinionated comments came from those

professionals who had experience working with group homes, on either side of the spectrum. For example, when asked a general opinion question about their feelings on foster care group homes, one professional spoke highly of the group homes ability to create a safe and structured environment for children who have been the victims of so much instability and change. On the other hand, another lamented the potential for child on child abuse within the home. When questioned further, it was revealed that these two professionals were referring to two very different settings. One was a long standing group home agency with abundant staffing, experience, therapeutic treatments, funding, and community support. The other was a group home referenced in a recent court case where a young child was sexually assaulted multiple times by two older house mates while the sole caretaker slept downstairs. Though it is clear that these two placements have fundamental differences in the way that they are operated, both are classified as foster care group homes.

Systems theory explains the importance of this social work role by describing human behavior as a complex structure founded on the ideal that “an effective system is based on individual needs, rewards, and expectations and attributes of the people living in the system,” and that environmental systems are directly involved in even individually based problem solving (Theories used in social work practice & practice models, 2014). According to this theory, because behavior and decisions are so heavily influenced by the environmental system, an ineffective or detrimental placement can have lasting negative effects on a child’s future. These negative effects can be seen well into adulthood. As one professional stated, “foster care teacher youth how to be good children. It doesn’t teach them how to be adults.” Another participant reported that, after surveying a number of

homeless young adults, “50% had previously been in foster care. This is disproportionately high... incredibly so.” Among foster care adults who aged out of the system, there are high rates of teen pregnancy, unemployment, high school dropout, poverty, and incarceration as compared to other groups (Gomez, Ryan, Norton, Jones, & Galán-Cisneros, 2015). It is essential that social workers act within their roles to reduce this trend.

### **Theories for People, Situations, and Events**

Current findings suggest that, when referring to the group home ideal, identifying relevant social work theories and stating whether or not they are successfully utilized is essential. For instance, Erickson’s Theory of Psychosocial Development can easily be considered relevant to foster care groups homes due to this entity’s direct contact with developing children. Erickson’s theory asserts that a person’s ego develops naturally as he or she overcomes certain crises and obstacles and establishes key personality traits such as a sense of trust, autonomy, initiative, and intimacy (Hutchison, 2013). Failure to master each of the developmental tasks can have lasting negative effects on a person’s ability to function within broader society. For example, if a child in the industry vs. inferiority stage (ages five through twelve approximately) is put in an environment where they are unable to explore their initiative and competence, or is placed in a setting where these displays of initiative lack positive feedback, it can have negative effects on the child’s self-esteem. If a child lacks self-esteem, he or she may begin to question his or her ability to achieve goals (McLeod, 2013).

Though foster children are already at a higher risk for having experienced developmental delays due to exposure to trauma, the group home ideal would be able to

combat this trauma with expert care and interventions in accordance with its intended purpose. The reality however is more complex. With the differing styles of care within the group home spectrum, it is inaccurate to say that group homes as a whole have been successful in utilizing and acknowledging this theory within their practices. While some may have the funding, staffing, and informed care models needed for interventions, others are simply a place for children to stay while classified as wards of the state.

This troubling reality is partially due to ineffective social policy. As examined in the literature review, the regulations required of foster parents has created a lack of available traditional foster homes. Children are often placed in group homes because they have nowhere else to go rather than as needed for behavioral or emotional concerns. Ideally, group homes were created to provide a transitional living space for those children with a higher level of emotional and behavioral issues who were leaving residential treatment but were not yet ready for the intimacy of a traditional foster home. In reality, foster care group homes have become, in the words of one interviewed professional, “a way to warehouse kids.” Two more participants described them as “internment camps” or “jails, where victims are being treated like prisoners.”

Due to this gap in the system, many children are not only placed in a much more restrictive setting than their mental health requires, they are also exposed to a number of peers whose behavior and aggression is far more disordered than their own. This can have negative effects on the behavioral outcomes of children in these settings. In relation to social learning theory, “learning occurs through observation and imitation” (Theories used in social work practice & practice models, 2014). If a child is exposed to behavior which is disordered, then he or she might imitate this behavior especially if it means

fitting in with peers. This is a common developmental theme during the adolescent behavioral stage, according to Erickson's theory. This is particularly true for children who are in highly restrictive group homes and have less peer interaction.

This isolation, while usually facilitated with the best intentions for the child, can have unforeseen consequences. For example, where one of the interviewed professionals saw on-site charter schools as a healthy way to prevent bullying and anxiety, another saw on-site charter schools in group homes as especially harmful because something as normal as school becomes abnormal in such a restrictive environment. Rather than experiencing school as most children do, these children remain on site with the same children they live with on a daily basis. Though this approach could be helpful when dealing with certain behavioral and emotional concerns, it could be equally detrimental' especially in regard to those children placed in group homes for "convenience" rather than for behavioral needs. This professional reasoned that outside schooling is necessary for children to establish normalcy in their lives. This normalcy includes making friends, eating meals, and playing without constant direct supervision and therapeutic analysis, which allows "kids to be kids rather than clients" for at least a portion of the day. The absence of this normalcy can have especially negative consequences when considering the typical demographics of children placed in foster care group homes and the importance of peer relations in the middle childhood and adolescent stages.

### **Theories for Social Work Practice**

In this last subcategory of theoretical knowledge, practitioners are encouraged to ask "should [social work] 'fit' people into the system, change the system—or both?" The relevant theories used to further our understanding of people, situations, and events used

previously in the discussion may suggest the need for a revolution of group homes over simple reform.

Many interviewed professionals believe that bureaucratic style of legislation along with the “reaction rather than prevention” style in which the United States creates many of its laws, has resulted in incredibly restrictive requirements which dissuade potentially effective foster parents from fostering, forcing more and more children to reside in group homes regardless of behavioral or emotional need. Foster parents and group home caregivers have difficulty attempting to discipline or enroll children in normalizing activities such as group sports because if the child gets hurt, it could result in a lawsuit. Rather than establishing ways for children to experience the consequences of their actions, if a child is causing trouble in the home, they are removed, either by law enforcement or by the child welfare system, and sent to a new placement. As one professional put it, “Normal kids get in a fight with their siblings get grounded. Foster kids get arrested. This goes on their record. This impacts their future.” When law enforcement is involved, altercations are recorded within youth records. These negative records can have lasting effects on youth looking for jobs and applying to universities. This can contribute to the negative statistics on unemployment and poverty mentioned previously.

These consequences can be explained using conflict theory. Conflict theory, as applied to social class by theorist Max Weber, operated on the basis that social, economic, and political structures create inequality (Hutchison, 2013). It is well known that the both the foster care system and the criminal justice system are disproportionately populated with minorities. Within the foster care system children of color are less likely

to find adoptive homes and, therefore, more likely to find themselves in group home placement. As stated before, children in group homes have a higher chance of conflict ending in police involvement due to restrictions, higher rates of exposure to violence, and the behavioral and emotional issues faced by people who have been victims of trauma. Multiple altercations with the law can affect how a person is viewed within society, and viewed within the law, as well as how a person responds to law and authority. This lack of normalcy in discipline can condition children to accept ideas of incarceration and criminalization which may in turn influence how they conduct themselves as adults.

### **Practice Knowledge**

Both factual and theoretical knowledge impact practice knowledge (see Figure 4). In social work practice, it is essential that professionals adhere to empowerment theories which seek to combat these patterns of inequality and injustice by recognizing their existence and seeking to reduce their influence through education, advocacy, and policy change (Hutchison, 2013). While this is clear in relation to foster care children in general, it is especially applicable for those who are placed in group homes. This complex goal could be achieved within the group home ideal. With the lack of unification among all group homes and the varying degrees of service and success of interventions, however, it appears that group homes as a whole may not be applying factual and theoretical knowledge to the benefit of the children that they are intended to help. The goal of establishing a best practices model of group homes, as is suggested in the third subcategory of the theoretical knowledge section, requires putting this model into reality through practice knowledge. Until the profession of social work and the field of child welfare are able to reduce these gaps between the ideal and the real, especially in relation

to group home approaches, there will continue to be a conflicting perception of the system. Most importantly, too many children entrusted to this system will continue to fall through this gap.

### **Limitations**

The information found in this thesis cannot be generalizable to all children's shelters. Due to the institutional review board (IRB) standards and the sensitive nature of this subject, interviews will be limited to working professionals rather than child welfare youth. Additionally, a lack of specifically relevant academic literature surrounding the topic of foster care group home design has been particularly challenging. "To date... existing empirical literature on congregate care for youth is limited, particularly in regard to the characteristics of youth residing in group homes, predictors of outcomes for this population, and the effect of group home care on youth outcomes" (Chow et al, 2014). While there are many personal accountants about time spent in group homes and information about other types of care (such as traditional foster care, kinship care, and transitional care), there have been few studies which incorporate research designs, comparison groups, and other theoretical forms of knowledge which document the nature and outcome of interventions (Brown, McCauley, Navita, & Saxe, 2013). Additionally, important child welfare topics (such as aging out, disproportionality, and learned helplessness) will not be addressed since they were beyond the scope of this thesis.

## **Conclusion**

Trevithick (2008) describes personal practice knowledge as personal knowledge and life experience that social workers have acquired in addition to the theoretical, factual, and practical knowledge that they bring to their practice (Trevithick, 2008). Learning these different forms of knowledge and how they relate is an integral part of understanding a subject completely. Before this thesis experience, I had only my own opinions and some volunteering relating to this subject and was lacking in facts, theory, and professional experience. In completing this thesis, I have gained valuable new knowledge. In conducting a literature review, hearing the different perspectives of social work professionals, and in visiting two foster care group settings, I was able to discover the complexities and contradictory perceptions surrounding this form of foster care.

In the beginning of this process, I truly believed that group homes were more positive than not. At that time, my long-term professional goal as a social worker was to open my own group home. Completing this thesis has shown me that, unless major fundamental changes are made to the group home model on a nation-wide level, this can no longer be a feasible goal of mine. I do believe, along with many scholars and professionals, that the group home ideal is still possible. Further, I now believe that if operated using certain trauma-informed techniques, they can facilitate positive change. The perceived reality, however, is that many group homes lack the resources, knowledge, and skills needed to successfully care for the high-risk children being placed in them.

The process of writing this thesis has been grueling but enlightening. Though I may not have determined “how to change the world,” I have certainly discovered information for myself. As I continue to grow in my learning and career, I hope to

continue researching this topic, building upon the knowledge gained in this thesis. In the introduction, I stated that the purpose of this thesis was to establish a framework for the basis of future career exploration. In that regard, I have been successful.

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