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An Occupational Therapy Approach to Education for Foster Parents

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BACKGROUND

There are over 437,000 children in foster care in the United States (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017), and 75% of them have experienced a form of trauma (Beyerlein & Bloch, 2014; Griffin et al., 2011). Organizations in San Diego County deliver required pre-licensure classes in a traditional classroom-style environment, which does not cater to the needs of varying learning styles (San Diego Foster Kids, n.d.). Occupational therapists provide group trainings and instruction which help increase knowledge, insight, and understanding of materials by increased the saliency of the material for participants (Radnitz, Christopher, & Gurayah, 2019). These group strategies are traditionally used in a mental health setting and have not been applied to foster parent education classes.

PURPOSE

To enhance pre-licensure curriculum using an OT perspective to group structure to meet the needs of a greater variety of learning styles.

Objectives

- Observe & analyze current programming for foster parents to identify areas to enhance the current curriculum
- Interview foster parents to identify their learning styles & hear their suggestions to implement in pre-licensure classes
- Create suggested enhancements for pre-licensure training and implement with foster parent educators

PROBLEM

The current structure of pre-licensure classes for foster parents in San Diego County does not support a variety of learning styles. Occupational therapists can help meet this need by utilizing specific group strategies that incorporate activities for a variety of learning styles to increase retention and facilitate a deeper understanding of the content.

METHODS

The doctoral student attended a variety of current classes offered at Straight from the Heart (SFTH) in San Marcos, California to observe and become familiar with the structure of the classes. A total of seventeen participants were recruited for semi-structured interviews via presentations at support groups, emails, word of mouth, flyers, and personal contacts. Interviews were conducted over the phone and were analyzed by the doctoral student for common themes. Participants (n=17) included 12 females and 5 males. Years of service as a foster parent varied from 3-15 years with an average of 7.8 years of service. On average, participants cared for 12 foster children with individual numbers ranging from 6-30 foster children. See Table 1 for a list of topics discussed during interviews with participants.

Table 1. Included Interview Topics

1. Preferred learning style
2. Experience with pre-licensure classes
3. Suggestions to enhance current pre-licensure classes
4. Strengths of SFTH and current pre-licensure classes

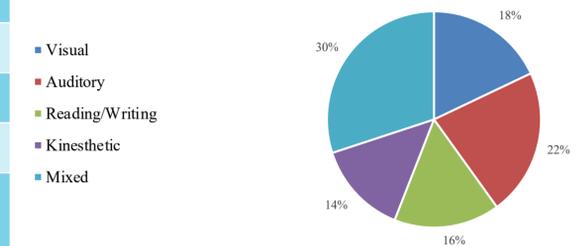
RESULTS & CONCLUSIONS

Types of Learning Styles:

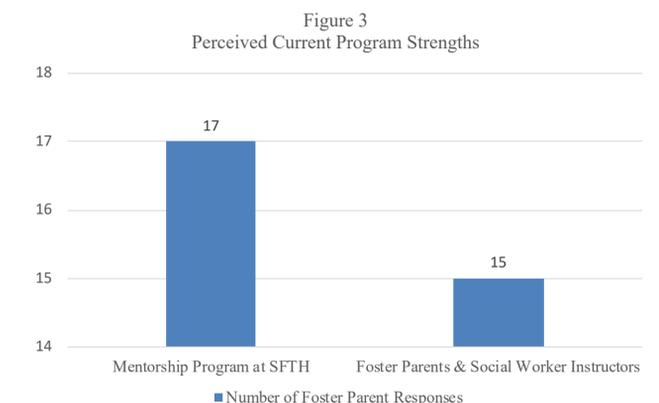
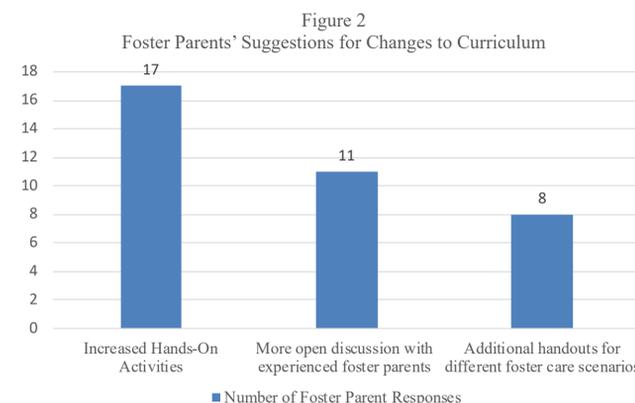
Table 2. Types of Learning Styles

- Visual – learns best by seeing
- Auditory – learns best by hearing
- Reading/Writing – learns best by writing
- Kinesthetic – learns best by doing
- Mixed – a combination of two or more of the above learning styles

Figure 1
Percentage of Learning Styles Amongst Foster Parents



Foster Parents' Suggestions for Changes & Perceived Current Program Strengths:



Conclusions & Discussions:

Based on the interview results, four suggestions were made to enhance the current pre-licensure curriculum. These include asking for participants' preferred learning styles at the start of the course, increasing opportunities for hands-on learning with abstract concepts including how trauma influences a child's development, more opportunities for open discussion with experienced foster parents on topics relating to foster care, and increased promotion of the mentorship program for new foster parents during the pre-licensure courses. These findings provide occupational therapists with a framework to serve as consultants for other foster parent education programs. The results suggest that for foster programs in San Diego county, there is a need to change the structure of pre-licensure classes to meet the needs for a variety of learning styles amongst foster parents. Occupational therapists provide multi-sensory, active, hands-on learning experiences that increase participation amongst learners and increase the saliency of the material, which increases the retention of knowledge (Radnitz et al., 2019). These hands-on learning experiences can be applied to foster parent education courses to help support a wider array of learning styles.

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