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An Exploration of Foster Carers and their Experiences of Forming Positive Attachments with Looked After Children: A Thematic Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Current literature highlights the importance of positive attachments between foster carers and Looked After children, for overall placement success. Although, research exploring the individual experiences of foster carers and the main factors, which assist them in forming positive attachments is limited. The present study adopted a qualitative research design in order to explore the personal experiences of five foster carers in-depth. Four females and one male were recruited through opportunity sampling from private fostering agencies. Semi-structured in-person interviews were employed to yield as much information as possible from the participants. Data analysis was then meticulously carried out using the method of thematic analysis. Three main themes emerged from the data; biological family, education and support. Recommendations for future research were then discussed. For example, a more heterogeneous sample of foster carers is required. This is so that the experiences of foster carers in forming positive attachments with Looked After children can be explored further, across different sub-groups.

KEY WORDS:	FOSTER CARERS	LACYP	ATTACHMENT	THEMATIC ANALYSIS	EXPERIENCES
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Introduction

When children and young people are at-risk and not adequately cared for by their biological parents, they are placed within the foster care system, which provides alternative care (Lawrence, Carlson and Egeland, 2006). Children and young people who are in the care of the Local Authority (LA), in residential foster care homes and foster care placements, are referred to as 'looked after', which was introduced by the Department of Health (1989). Looked After Children and Young People (LACYP) enter the foster care system for a range of reasons, which include LACYP being subject to abuse, neglect, family breakdowns and other factors threatening their safety and well-being (Randle et al., 2016). They are placed within the system at various ages and remain for varied lengths of time (Richardson, 2003). The Department for Education (2018) highlight that, in England, there were 53,420 LACYP in the foster care system during March 2017, with the number continuing to rise. Many of these LACYP are placed in foster care placements, as a shift in policy involved placing LACYP with foster carers instead of residential homes. This was due to the assumption that placing LACYP in environments, which were more closely related to a 'normal' family environment was a more suitable alternative (Farmer, 2004).

However, qualitative findings highlight that poor attachments between foster carers and LACYP heavily contribute to the increase in placement breakdowns (Chamberlain et al., 2006; Rock et al., 2013). This is because LACYP exhibit challenging behaviours, including insecure attachments, development delays, and psychiatric disorders (Sawyer, Carbone, Searle, & Robinson, 2007). As a result, the demands placed on the abilities of foster carers have increased, as they are required to provide care and a nurturing environment for LACYP, who have experienced troublesome home environments and display complex behaviours (Khoo and Skoog, 2013). Therefore, the role foster carers undertake is becoming more challenging, as they attempt to form positive attachments and meet the needs of LACYP (Ainsworth and Hansen, 2005). Kaplan, Pelcovitz and Labruna (1999) explain that secure attachments can only be formed when a child's individual needs are met, otherwise an emotional connection cannot be developed with foster carers. Current literature argues that positive attachments between LACYP and foster carers are a major component to achieving placement stability (Golding, 2006).

The theory of Attachment, developed by Bowlby (1969), proposes that an emotional bond between an infant and their mother is formed early on in a child's life, which is an inherent biological process. Infants have a tendency to seek comfort, support and protection from this caregiver, which makes this dyadic relationship fundamental for the child's overall development (Zeanah, Shauffer and Dozier, 2001). Furthermore, internal

working models are then formed, which are defined as a set of expectations and beliefs about the self, others and the relationship between the self and those around us (McWey, Acock and Porter, 2010). Attachment behaviours are salient when it comes to identity development and for the individual to be able to relate to others (Erich et al., 2009). However, Dogra et al. (2002) outlines that a criticism of the theory is that it is centred around biological mothers, as an infant's main caregiver. Although, it has been confirmed that this theory informs foster care practices. This is because it guides foster carers and practitioners to comprehend the consequences of childhood neglect, separation and loss, and how LACYP form attachments with foster carers (Hughes, 2004). Therefore, the theory of Attachment is also relevant to female foster carers and the formation of attachments with LACYP.

In addition to this, Dogra et al. (2002) suggests that even though the initial bond is formed with an infant's mother as their primary caregiver, internal working models can be altered, as individuals are able to form positive attachments with new caregivers. Bowlby's theory was developed further by Ainsworth (1989), as findings suggested that the quality of the relationship between an infant and their primary caregiver influences the development of different attachment styles. When an infant is separated from their primary caregiver, those who are ambivalent-secure will seek increased interaction with their caregivers and are likely to feel less threatened when separated. Whereas, avoidant-insecure children are suggested to conceal their distress when they experience separation. However, Kaplan, Pelcovitz and Labruna (1999) contradict this, as they argue children who experience separation from their primary caregiver will display negative behaviours, despite their attachment type to their caregiver. Furthermore, Zima et al. (2000) argue that the attachment difficulties displayed by LACYP are a result of the circumstances they are exposed to when with their biological families. Therefore, they suggest that even though an attachment can be developed between foster carers and LACYP, it is likely to be insecure.

On the other hand, Andersson's (2008) longitudinal study on LACYP found that secure attachments can be formed with foster carers. The findings suggest that the participants foster carers had been a significant attachment figure during their childhood, in despite of their type of attachment with their birth families and whether or not they had contact. This supports the claim that positive attachments can be formed between foster carers and LACYP. However, previous findings from some studies from Oosterman et al.'s (2007) meta-analysis of studies on foster care disruptions contradict this. This is because it is argued that foster carers are more successful in forming positive attachments when LACYP have reduced or no contact with their biological parents. Although, through exploring the family relationships between LACYP, their biological and foster carer families, in Sweden, Andersson (2008) concluded that attachment,

placement permanence and the relationships between LACYP and their foster care and biological families are interrelated. However, contact between the child and their biological family only had positive outcomes when the foster carers displayed a positive attitude towards the child's biological parents and maintained contact with the extended family.

Furthermore, Joseph et al.'s (2013) study provided more recent support for Andersson's (2008) findings, as they highlighted that over half of the children from their sample had formed positive attachments with their foster carers, despite having a negative attachment to their biological parents. This supports the claim that foster carers can form positive attachments with LACYP, regardless of their relationship with their biological family. The above findings also contradict earlier studies measuring the long-term effects of separation, which argue that if a child experiences early separation from their primary caregivers, they are likely to experience negative outcomes in later childhood (Dogra et al., 2002). This is because Steels and Simpson (2017) outline that LACYP in foster care placements have largely good outcomes and are capable of forming positive attachments with new caregivers. Therefore, they concluded that high-quality foster care placements do exist and are often a better alternative to residential foster care homes or them being placed back with their biological parents.

Samrai, Beinart and Harper (2011) explored the experiences of foster carers, which limited studies have done, and highlighted that accessible support services aid foster carers in forming positive attachments with LACYP. Although, it was evident that not all participants had access to these services. Bywater et al. (2010) provides support for this claim, as foster carers expressed that support is not always available nor accessible. Through using semi-structured interviews, six categories emerged from the data and were identified. These include: support; professional relationships; fostering experience; expectations; managing transitions; and attachment. From these findings, it was argued that positive attachments between foster carers and LACYP was a significant factor for placement success. However, this was only when foster carers received adequate training, accessible support, had good relationships with professionals and received accurate information about the child. In addition to this, training was claimed to be more useful when it was integrated with appropriate topics, such as attachment and separation. Previous research supports this, as Golding (2003) outlines that it is more appropriate to include the attachment difficulties LACYP are likely to experience when theory-based programmes on attachment are incorporated into foster care training.

In spite of the findings surrounding the importance of foster carers forming positive attachments with LACYP, a vast amount of research is limited to the experiences of LACYP. There is less focus on the experiences of foster carers (Geiger, Hayes and

Lietz, 2013). Zeanah, Shauffer and Dozier (2011) note that through qualitatively exploring the lived experiences of foster carers, foster care practices and policies could be better informed, whilst social services are provided with a more comprehensive understanding of the specific needs of foster carers. The gaps in literature need to be addressed, as various placement changes lead to further attachment disruptions (Dozier et al., 2001). This is because the negative consequences of placement breakdowns are associated with LACYP withdrawing and detaching from their foster carers, which can lead to a permanent state of detachment (Rock et al., 2013). In turn, the role of foster carers is challenged further. Newton et al. (2000) state that, for foster carers to form positive attachments with LACYP, stability is critical.

Due to the large quantity of research being focused on the experiences of LACYP, it is evident that further research ought to be conducted exploring the experiences of foster carers (Khoo and Skoog, 2013). Specifically, within the United Kingdom. Through raising awareness of the rewards and challenges faced by foster carers when forming positive attachments with LACYP, the current gaps in literature can be addressed. As well as this, improvements can be implemented, so that the needs of foster carers and LACYP are met (Zeanah, Shauffer and Dozier, 2011). Therefore, the main aim of the current study is to explore the positive and negative experiences of foster carers in forming positive attachments with LACYP, through the use of qualitative methodology. The research question is what factors assist foster carers in forming and maintaining positive attachments with LACYP?

Methodology

The present study utilised a qualitative design, similar to previous research, as the focus was on producing in-depth data surrounding the lived experiences of foster carers (Kaplan, 2015). From this, an interpretivist epistemological position was adopted, as this paradigm upholds that reality is subjective and is socially constructed in line with how individuals see fit (Krauss, 2005). As a result, it is recognised that the experiences of foster carers in forming positive attachments with LACYP will be unique and personal. Through using qualitative methodology, the researcher was able to identify the meanings individuals place on events and their perceptions of the social world (Chandler, Anstey and Ross, 2015). This is because meaning is assumed to be embedded in a participant's lived experiences and is then influenced by the researcher's perceptions during the research process (Nembhard, 2009). Therefore, this is the most suitable approach when exploring the lived experiences of foster carers.

Participants

Participants with foster caring experience were required, so opportunity sampling was employed. Five non-kinship foster carers were recruited non-randomly and at convenience from different private fostering agencies, after ethics approval was granted. Foster carers who were eligible for participation were sent a letter of invitation and a participant information sheet, which outlined the true aims of the research. This addressed the ethical issue of deception. Those who replied were contacted to arrange an interview. The sample was comprised of four females and one male, with foster caring experience ranging from three weeks to six years. Participants had experienced a range of placement types, such as short-term, long-term and respite care. One participant was a single carer with no biological children and four of the participants were married with biological children. The ages of the children that the participants cared for ranged from seven to nineteen years old. The sample size was sufficient due to the time scale of the study (Carlsen and Glenton, 2011), as five to fifteen participants are usually adequate. Compared to quantitative studies, the sample size is much smaller within qualitative research (Sargeant, 2012).

Data collection

Informed consent was gained prior to the interviews commencing and participants were made aware of their right to withdraw. Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were employed to enable the researcher to access the thoughts and feelings of participants (Doody and Noonan, 2013), regarding their experiences of fostering and forming positive attachments with LACYF. From this, an understanding of the meaning ascribed to this particular experience was developed (Sutton and Austin, 2015). This was established using open-ended questions, which were devised to encourage participants to critically reflect on their experiences. This also gave them the opportunity to pursue their responses in more detail (Stuckey, 2013). Detailed descriptions were sought through encouraging participants to speak openly about their experiences, without judgement. In doing so, the research aims and objectives were addressed (Tubey, Rotich and Bengat, 2015). An interview guide was used, so that the interviews remained focused and the interview time was utilised (Jamshed, 2014). Questions included the rewards and challenges associated with fostering, the relationship with birth families and the support they received.

Jamshed (2014) noted that an informal approach should be taken, so that participants are relaxed and feel comfortable. The interviews were also carried out in convenient and familiar places for the participants, with all five participants choosing their own homes. This is because research demonstrates that when interviews are carried out in

the participant's natural environment, more realistic information is acquired (Gill et al., 2008). During the two hour long interviews, participants were able to ensure that all relevant topics had been discussed. The participants were also able to touch upon any issues that they thought were relevant without feeling rushed. The length of the interviews reflects the in-depth nature of the data collected. An audio recorder was used to record the interviews, whilst the researcher took notes of the participant's body language and any additional details they deemed necessary (Sutton and Austin, 2015). This method of data collection was the most appropriate, as the flexibility allowed participants to elaborate on their personal experiences. The researcher was then able to capture a true insight of the experiences of foster carers in forming positive attachments with LACYP.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was the method of data analysis employed, due to the fact that when analysing qualitative data, a flexible approach is required (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Braun and colleague (2006) provide guidelines when utilising this data analysis method, which researchers must adhere to. The six stage process of thematic analysis includes the researcher: making themselves familiar with the data; searching for initial codes; categorising the codes into initial themes; reviewing the themes that were identified; finalising the themes; and then producing the report. The audio data collected was repeatedly listened to, so that the researcher could become more familiar with the data, so that the interviews could be transcribed verbatim as accurate as possible. This also enabled the researcher to capture the crucial elements of the interviews, such as the tone of voice, the pauses in dialogue and emphasis placed on specific topics (Bailey, 2008). As a result, the specific rewards and challenges foster carers experienced when developing positive attachments with LACYP could be thoroughly explored.

The data was then rigorously analysed line-by-line, so that it could be interpreted as accurately as possible and in full detail. Codes, immersed within the data, began to emerge, which allows the researcher to identify topics, issues, similarities and differences revealed by the narratives of foster carers (Mannay et al., 2017). After the researcher has finished the coding process, the codes can then be grouped together from the transcripts to create themes (Rock et al., 2013). This allows the findings to be presented in a coherent and meaningful way (Sutton and Austin, 2015). This method of data analysis was the most suitable, as it permitted the researcher to pinpoint the similarities between the participant's experiences of forming positive attachments with LACYP and, which factors impacted their experiences the most. Consequentially, the analysis has increased the understanding around the topic and has added to current literature.

Analysis and Discussion

The current study aimed to gain a wider understanding of the factors, which assist foster carers in forming positive attachments with LACYP. An in-depth understanding was sought through exploring the participant's individual positive and negative experiences. After a thematic analysis was meticulously employed, three main themes emerged and were identified: biological family; education; and support. The findings from the present study were in accordance with the existing findings surrounding foster caring and positive attachments.

Biological Family

In accordance with previous findings (Oosterman et al., 2007), the current study demonstrated that the extent to which contact between LACYP and their birth families impacts the attachments with their foster carers is contradictory. The feelings expressed by participants towards their experiences was mixed, as some regarded contact with the child's birth family as a positive, although for the majority it was the opposite. For example, participant J1 expressed how "having contact with them (birth parents) made it worse" (626). However, Haight, Kagle, & Black (2003) outlined that this is because contact between LACYP and their birth families is often complex and conflicting. Although, previous research has established that even though foster carers experience mixed feelings towards contact between their placement child and birth family, many understood that it was vital part of the placement and can have a positive effect on the attachment between themselves and LACYP (Sinclair, 2005). The current findings supported this:

It was important to us that she felt supported when having contact with her mum. Even though it was a difficult situation, she leaned on me (S4, 598-600).

However, Leathers (2003) outlines that when LACYP have a relationship with their biological family, it can cause them to feel conflicted between where their loyalties lie. Participant J3 explained how "she (the child) felt conflicted and disloyal" (770). Although, the study on parental visitation found that this was more prominent when LACYP had a strong relationship with both their foster families and birth families. This was demonstrated within the current findings:

He has a good relationship with his grandma, but he feels like he has to please us both (H2, 700-701).

Samrai, Beinart and Harper (2011) argue that the child's biological family being present throughout a placement can have a harmful effect on both, foster carers and their placement child. In turn, this hinders the development of positive attachments between foster carers and LACYF. This is because foster carers deal with several issues including troubled relationships with the biological parents and family tensions, which causes disruptions between foster carers and the placement child (Mennen & O'Keefe, 2005). Participant H2 expressed that "I facilitated contact with his brother and it was horrific" (815). Further to this, research has demonstrated that a quarter of foster carers have had difficult experiences with the child's biological family, which includes aggressive, violent, or inappropriate behaviour (Austerberry et al., 2013). The present study is in accordance with this finding:

His brother verbally abused him... you end up picking the pieces up (H2, 816).

Due to the behavioural and emotional consequences of contact with their birth family, children often exhibit challenging behaviours and negative emotions, which foster carers have to manage (Haight et al., 2002). For example, participant J3 expressed that "when T sees her sisters, she's upset when she comes back because she misses them" (818-819). Moyers et al. (2006) claimed that 49% of foster carers reported experiencing difficulties associated with the biological family. From this, it was concluded that LACYF having contact with their biological family is not always in their best interest, and 34% of foster carers agreed with this. The present study supports previous findings (Samrai, Beinart and Harper, 2011).

Contact isn't always a good thing, it throws them off and confuses them (J3, 767-768)

As a result, participant J3 explained how "you know that when they come back they're going to act out" (762-763). This creates tension within the dual relationship between foster carers and LACYF, as Rock et al. (2013) highlights that foster parents can begin to reject the child due to the fact that they feel powerless when confronted by the child's distress (Murray et al., 2011; Sen & McCormack, 2011). This is whilst the child becomes hostile and rejects their environment (Samrai, Beinart and Harper, 2011).

In contrast, the current findings demonstrate that LACYF having contact with their biological families can be a positive, as participant H2 expressed that their experience was "a positive... very positive" (811). However, this was only when foster carers and the child's biological family adopted a positive attitude towards one another (Boyle,

2015). It is important that foster carers and birth families have a positive relationship, as it has been demonstrated that LACYP who continue to have contact with their biological family are more likely to experience less attachment difficulties. As a result, they are able to form positive attachments with their foster carers (Finzi et al., 2001). Although, this can only be achieved when foster carers have a positive attitude towards the biological family (Andersson, 2009). Participant J3 claimed that “they need to know that you’re not judging their parents... you have to build a relationship with their parents too” (770-772). This evidently impacts the attachment between foster carers and their placement child.

Therefore, it is evident that foster carers experience difficulties when forming positive attachments with LACYP due to contact with the biological family. As a result, it may be appropriate for foster carers to receive more informed techniques of managing contact between the child and their birth family, to reduce tensions and conflict.

Education

The level of education foster carers receive regarding positive attachments was a prominent theme, which emerged from the data. Recent findings have demonstrated that foster carers with an increased skill level have more stable and successful placements. From this, it is evident that there is a need for foster carers to receive a high level of training and education (Randle et al., 2016). Daly and Perry (2011) suggest that it is important for foster carers to comprehend the underlying causes of the behaviours, as they deal with more challenging and complex behaviours present in LACYP. For example, attachment difficulties and aggression. Despite this, Kerker and Dore (2006) suggest that there is still a lack of training and education available for foster carers. This is because their study suggests that although foster carers receive standard training, the emotional and behavioural difficulties of LACYP can result in foster carers feeling unprepared and not able to manage their behaviours. However, the findings from the present study contradict this:

The training programmes were excellent... and they keep putting us through training (H1, 288).

It did prepare us (J1, 548).

It has previously been highlighted that the UK government acknowledged that the training programmes offered to foster carers were in need of improvements (Farmer *et al.*, 2005). Further to this, Murray, Tarren-Sweeney and France’s (2010)

study of foster carers perceptions of support and training reported that foster carers felt that their needs were unmet. Although, Samrai, Beinhart and Harper (2011) suggest that this has been achieved, due to the fact that the training and education offered by LA and private fostering agencies has been developed. This is supported by the current findings, as participant H2 highlights that “there’s endless courses that you can attend annually... all the new courses that are out and there’s a choice of venues now, but if you wanted any specific training and they didn’t offer it they would find it for you” (H2, 431-434). However, Samrai, Beinhart and Harper (2011) suggest that training programmes on positive attachments need to be informed by attachment theory more closely in order to enhance the knowledge of foster carers.

Contrastingly, the present findings would suggest that in fact present training and education accessible by foster carers is adequate in aiding them form positive attachments with LACYP. For example, participant J1 explained that “the attachment training was excellent because it gave me some tips and techniques in dealing with his behaviour, whilst trying to form a bond with him” (476-479). Wilson et al. (2000) outlines that when foster carers feel competent in handling the challenging behaviours and attachment difficult exhibited by LACYP, they are more likely to have a more positive experience. The findings suggest that participants were satisfied with the current training and education they were offered, which demonstrates that the level of training foster carers are currently receiving is adequate for their role. Therefore, foster carers may have an adequate understanding of the behaviours and needs of LACYP, which Kaplan, Pelcovitz and Labruna (1999) stated was necessary for positive attachment to be formed.

Every foster placement when you’ve been approved should do this course out of any before they get a placement because when you are dealing with a child who’s in crisis and somethings going wrong, i can’t tell you the understanding it gives you” (J3, 462-465).

Current literature argues that foster care placements are only successful when the individual needs of LACYP are addressed and foster carers are sufficiently trained in doing so (Golding, 2003; Laybourne, Andersen and Sands, 2008). Despite the findings from the current study highlighting that foster carers have an adequate level of training to care for LACYP, participants expressed that it was important for them to be able to relate to the educators of the training programmes. This is supported by a multi-feasibility study carried out by Bywater and colleagues (2010). They suggest that it is important that facilitators of foster care training and education programmes possess knowledge of the complexities associated with foster caring. For example, one participant expressed:

The attachment training was run by a lady who had been a social worker, she was very skilled in attachment theory, so she was great at tutoring, but she was also a foster carer... so she saw things from all angles (J1, 88-90).

Despite the present findings suggesting that the level of training and education is suitable for the current population of carers, the demands for foster carers continue to increase. In turn, the requirements are becoming less restrictive (Schofield et al., 2013). As a result, Bunday et al. (2015) suggest that more specialised training packages ought to be considered in order to enhance positive attachment relationships between foster carers and LACYP. Perhaps such packages of training would be most beneficial if made compulsory prior to placing the child.

Support

Williams and Kerfoot (2005) argue that foster parents require advice and a vast amount of support when caring for LACYP, due to the challenging nature of the role. The findings from the current study highlight that participants had mixed experiences of the support they received. Particularly, the support they received, which assisted them in forming positive attachments with LACYP.

The support you get whilst you have a placement is variable (M5, 231).

Current literature outlines that foster carers can feel discontent with the support they receive from external services and agencies (Murray, Tarren-Sweeney and France, 2010). Furthermore, MacGregor et al. (2006) demonstrates that one of the most important element of support reported by foster carers was good communication with professionals. However, the present findings highlight a dissatisfaction with the support received, particularly with social services. It was expressed by participant H2 that "ive had very limited support from social services" (405-406). More recently, Khoo and Skoog (2013) found that there is a strained relationship between foster carers and social workers. The present study supports this claim:

I wasn't overly fond of their direct social worker... what made it worse was that she was scared of him (J1, 322).

It's very difficult dealing with social services, his social worker was useless (H2, 395).

I was annoyed because their social worker was absent when she should have been there supporting us (S4, 506-507).

Due to the absence of the social worker during a placement, foster carers can experience more stress, as they feel unsupported (MacGregor et al., 2006). Murray, Tarren-Sweeney and France (2010) provides support for this claim, as they argue that the stress foster carers experience is related to their poor relationships with their social workers rather than their foster caring experience. Further to this, participants expressed that “they’ve all got their agendas” (J1, 465) and “as long as they tick their box and there is a child into a placement they’ve followed procedure and met their targets” (M4, 453-456). Pasztor, Holinger, Inkelas and Haflon (2006) argue that the troubled relationship between social workers and foster carers is due to the fact that information regarding the child is often withheld from foster carers. This then leads to foster carers providing care for LACYP beyond their level of training and what they are competent in providing. In turn, this hinders the development of positive attachments between foster carers and LACYP.

The placement broke down after a month and it was revealed that he should never have been in foster care. He should have been in a secure residential placement. That shook us completely (J1, 20-22).

As a result, foster carers have become distrustful of social works and the system they operate within (MacGregor et al., 2006). For example, participant J1 felt that “the agency possibly knew more about him than they told us” (291). Although, other participants explained that “this wasn’t the case” (M5, 356) in their circumstance. Therefore, MacGregor and colleagues (2006) argue that foster carers must receive accurate information about the placement child and their needs. However, many times this is due to the issues of privacy and confidentiality (Pasztor, Hollinger, Inkelas, & Haflon, 2006). For example:

If it is a respite placement, you don’t get that information, which is difficult because you don’t have that background information of them. It’s hard to bond with them... even though it’s only a short time (S4, 411-414).

Although, it was recognised by foster carers that the services provided by the LA are “underfinanced and overworked they’ve got too many cases on” (H2, 397-398). Consequentially, much of the support received by foster carers was from their fostering agencies, as participant H2 expresses that “the support that i get is from my agency”

(404-405). Recent research has highlighted that it is necessary for fostering agencies and professionals involved in the foster care placement to make foster carers feel appreciated and supported in their challenging role (Zeanah, Shauffer and Dozier, 2011; Randle et al., 2016). The present findings suggest that private fostering agencies are a good support service, as participant M5 expresses how “the agency social worker was supportive... you receive 24-hour support from them” (378-379). Macgregor et al. (2006) highlights that the most important elements of support reported by foster carers was emotional support, trust and good communication with professionals, which is supported by Samrai, Beinhart and harper’s (2011). However, participant J1 expressed that “i don’t think that anyone can support you emotionally” (494-495). Although, other participants demonstrated that their agency offered adequate support:

They’re a good listening ear... you can offload to them when they come they don’t judge... if there was any kind of cause for concern then they would help you address that cause for concern because it’s in their interest (H2, 417-419).

We have a monthly visit where it’s to talk about anything that i want to talk about... they don’t come for the person, they come to support you (S4, 409-410).

As outlined by Murray, Tarren-Sweeney and France (2010), a substantial amount of support is required by foster carers, due to them caring for LACYP with a wide range of difficulties. Therefore, there is a demand for a multiagency support network to be readily available, so that support can be tailored to meet the needs of individual foster carers. Specifically, support for foster carers in forming positive attachments with LACYP.

Limitations of the present study

The main limitation of the current study is the sample, as it only comprised of five participants who all identified as White British. This limits the understanding of foster carers experiences in forming positive attachments to one culture. In addition to this, the male to female participant ratio was disproportionate. However, they reported similar experiences, which must be acknowledged given that attachment theory is focused on a female caregiver as the main attachment figure. Although, as the type of placement, placement length and participant variables were not accounted for, it is unknown whether these factors directly affected the findings. Furthermore, foster carers with more positive experiences or those with challenging experiences may have been more inclined to participate. Despite this, participants may have withheld information, so that they were not portrayed in a negative light, which means the researcher may not have captured a true picture of the experiences of foster carers in forming positive

attachments with LACYP. Although, Tubey, Rotich and Bengat (2015) outline that qualitative research is less concerned with generalising results to wider populations.

Recommendations

The findings from the current study highlight that it is important for LA and private fostering agencies to acknowledge the importance of positive attachments between foster carers and LACYP more closely. Foster care practices regarding contact between LACYP and their biological family's needs to be more refined, as it is evident that it can often cause more disruption than good. As a result, this can negatively impact the attachment between foster carers and the child. It is important that foster carers feel adequately supported, particularly when dealing with the child's biological family. Those within the multidisciplinary team surrounding the child, such as social workers and health professionals, must acknowledge the needs of the foster carer as well as the child, so that the needs of both individuals can be met. Whilst the current findings have been valuable, future research ought to build on these findings and further explore the factors, which impact the experiences of foster carers in forming positive attachments with LACYP. This should be done utilising a larger heterogeneous sample, within the UK. The findings can then inform foster care practices further and policies can be implemented more effectively.

Concluding remarks

The present study builds on the current, limited literature available surrounding the experiences of foster carers forming positive attachments with LACYP. Although it did not replicate the findings from one, single study, it is in accordance with the majority of findings available. The present study has demonstrated that a range of factors contribute to the formation of positive attachments between foster carers and LACYP, which, in turn, can impact placement success. The amount of support they receive, as well as contact with a person's biological family influences the attachments formed between foster carers and LACYP. However, the findings did contradict the current literature surrounding the education and training available to foster carers, as it was found to be adequate. Although, training programmes must continue to develop to meet the demanding needs of foster carers. The themes that emerged gave insight into the positive and negative experiences of foster carers as well as highlighting the factors, which assist foster carers in forming positive attachments with LACYP. This allowed the research aim to be addressed. From this, future recommendations were suggested, so that these concepts can be developed further to increase placement success.

Reflexive Analysis

Sutton and Austin (2015) suggest that reflexivity requires the researcher to articulate their position within the research to their audience, whilst simultaneously reflecting on their own perceptions and biases. This takes place throughout the process.

As the researcher, my professional experiences have contributed to my interest in positive attachments between foster carers and LACYP. My position within a SEMH secondary school, supporting children with social, emotional, behavioural and mental health difficulties, involves working primarily with LACYP and their caregivers. As a result, I have seen first-hand the positive effects foster carers have on the outcomes of the children in their care. However, I have also seen the negative outcomes foster care placements can have on foster carers and LACYP due to the difficulties LACYP display. Particularly, attachment difficulties. Despite the clear need for positive attachments between foster carers and LACYP, there are gaps in current literature surrounding how we can adequately support foster carers in doing so. This would aim to increase foster carer retention and reduce placement breakdowns. Therefore, it is important to me that awareness is raised surrounding the positive and negative experiences associated with fostering and the forming of positive attachments with LACYP. Foster carers are an integral part of society and should be valued as parents with a specific skill set to provide care for LACYP whom they have no biological connection with. Without them, many children would be left without care and at-risk for negative outcomes.

Given my experience, it could have been assumed that I would have expected to find a lack of attachment between foster carers and LACYP. However, these assumptions would have not been helpful when interpreting the data collected. I was well-informed of the fact that my experiences with foster carers and LACYP could have influenced my research, as it could have impacted how I interpreted and analysed the data. In spite of this, I believe that my positioning within the research was appropriate in order to adequately explore the experiences of foster carers in forming positive attachments with LACYP. A vast amount of research thus far, has been carried out by researchers with a connection to participants and the foster care system, however I was able to remove such bias'. This was due to the fact that I had no direct involvement with foster carers recruited prior to the study, so I was able to ensure that there was no conflict of interest. I have also not had any direct involvement with LA or private fostering agencies, so I was not biased in my opinion towards them. The relationship between myself and the participants remained professional throughout the interviews. However, I was aware of the sensitivity around the topic, so I made a conscious effort to be empathetic and understanding towards their experiences. Whilst remaining impartial, I presented myself in a warm and friendly manner to encourage openness.

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