

# Upping the ante!

## The training and status of foster carers in Queensland

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*This paper presents key findings from current North Queensland doctoral research on the topic of foster carer education, training and support. Sixty-one interviews were conducted with Indigenous, non-Indigenous and relative foster carers and a broad range of other 'key informants'. Research findings presented indicate the need for more highly specialised and accredited training for foster carers than currently exists in Queensland, and argues for the professionalisation of foster care linked to increased payments and improved support for foster carers. The paper concludes that such changes in the current foster care system are crucial if foster carers are to be recruited to, and retained in, the role and, more importantly, for there to be much improved outcomes for children in statutory care.*

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This paper presents information relating to doctoral research which has been in process for the past three years. The topic of the research focuses on the education, training and support needs of foster carers in the Mackay Whitsunday Region of the former Queensland Department of Communities, which takes in the geographical areas of Mackay, Whitsunday and Bowen, some 90,355 sq. kms. or 5.2% of the State of Queensland (Department of Communities 2004).

Over past decades, foster care has become the primary, and in many instances the only, option for alternative care placements for children and young people needing out-of-home care in Queensland (PeakCare Queensland 2003), which is also the case for all Australian states. The role of foster carers has also changed dramatically, having become significantly more demanding as the complexities of modern life are reflected in the social conditions and problems of children and young people now coming into care.

Governments need to ensure that foster carers to whom they entrust the care of so many children and young people are the best people for the task. This is especially important as they are expected to fulfil the demanding responsibilities of the statutory obligations of their role and meet the high expectations which government and the broader community have of them. Governments have a duty of care, therefore, to ensure that foster carers are highly trained, prepared and supported, thus enabling them to provide the highest possible standards of care for children in care.

However, with the recent Queensland media reports of children in foster care being further abused (Madigan 2003; Madigan & Odgers 2003; Madigan & Wardill 2003) and the subsequent Queensland Crime and Misconduct Commission (CMC) (2004) inquiry into the abuse of children in foster care, it could be questioned whether foster carers are, in fact, being well enough prepared, trained and supported to deal with the myriad complex issues with which they are confronted on a daily basis.

This research set out to seek answers to this question and, based on its findings, make recommendations to the Queensland Government regarding areas for improvement in policy and practice relevant to the training and support of foster carers.

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Before launching into the presentation of research findings, it is important to note that foster carer training in all Australian states and territories varies significantly, from those which provide formal Certificate III qualifications in Victoria to others which provide no standard approach to training for foster carers, such as in the Northern Territory. In Queensland, a more formal approach to foster carer training has been a slowly evolving process as presented in the following overview.

## FOUNDATIONS OF QUEENSLAND FOSTER CARER TRAINING

At the time of writing, the 'Sharing the Care' pre-service foster carer training package is the *only* departmentally endorsed training program for foster carers in Queensland. The history of foster carer training in this state is based upon the British 'Parenting Plus' foster carer training program which was introduced to Queensland in 1988 where it was trialed in selected offices in South East Queensland. Not long afterwards it was renamed the 'Challenge of Foster Care'.

In 1992 the Challenge of Foster Care became the statewide, departmentally endorsed, pre-service foster carer training program (Juratowitch 2004; Armstrong 2004). However, it was further revised in 1996 and renamed 'Sharing the Care'. In 1996, this new version of foster carer pre-service training received national accreditation (Armstrong 2004) which eventually expired in July 2003. At the time of writing, it remains the only training which the Queensland Government requires foster carers to complete at any time during their fostering career. However, as a result of the recent CMC Inquiry (2004) in Queensland, the Department of Child Safety is about to launch a newly developed training program for foster carers titled 'Quality Care: Foster Care Training'. This program incorporates both pre-service and ongoing training for foster carers during their first 12 months in the role. This training package is competency based<sup>1</sup> but non-accredited by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training. It will be compulsory for all newly recruited foster carers, including relative carers, to undertake this training prior to approval as foster carers.

Prior to 1992, foster carers who were already 'in the system' were not required to undertake any specific training, either at the time of their commencement or thereafter. Despite the introduction of the Challenge of Foster Care in 1992 and Sharing the Care in 1996 in Queensland, the latter was not

routinely applied to all newly recruited foster carers until January 2003 when Departmental policy made it compulsory to do so (Queensland Department of Families 2003). In practice, this policy was not applied to relative foster carers (CMC 2004).

In Queensland the situation up to January 2003 was that at best there have been some motivated foster carers undertaking most or all of the training available to them and, at worst, there were those who have never undertaken any training at all. Such an *ad hoc* approach to training has led to the situation where foster carers across the State have disparate levels of knowledge and skills which, in turn, translates into significant inconsistencies in the standards and quality of care provided to children in care (CMC 2004).

Foster Care Queensland, as a 'key informant' to this research, reports the state of foster carer training in Queensland in this way:

... there is no big picture of training, there's no commitment to it, there's no funding for it, it's just a disaster ... (Foster Care Queensland 2003).

*... at best there have been some motivated foster carers undertaking most or all of the training available to them and, at worst, there were those who have never undertaken any training at all.*

## THE RESEARCH

The project was undertaken using semi-structured interviews of approximately 2 hours in duration with 40 foster carers and 21 'other key informants'. There were 12 Indigenous and 28 non-Indigenous foster carers in this study. Six carers were relative foster carers. In total, there were 28 female and 12 male carer participants.

'Other key informants' comprised representatives of State and national peak bodies representing foster carers and foster children (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous), non-government child and welfare agencies, fostering agencies, organisations representing volunteers and organisations representing Australian South Sea Islanders, Department of Communities officers, training organisations (peak bodies and training providers) and social science experts in the fields of social work and psychology.

Selection of foster carer research participants was undertaken through the use of stratified random sampling. To do so, the total number of carers in Mackay (134) and

<sup>1</sup> Competency Based Training (or CBT) is training which develops skills, knowledge and attitudes required to achieve competency standards. Competency standards are an industry determined specification of performance which sets out the skills, knowledge and attitudes required to operate effectively in employment (Department of Education, Science & Training 2005).

those in the combined Whitsunday and Bowen areas (33) were identified. Foster carers were further categorised according to whether they were Indigenous (Mackay, 48; Whitsunday/Bowen, 6) or non-Indigenous (Mackay 86; Whitsunday/Bowen, 27). These totals were then converted to percentages, as represented below, in each of these four sub-groups.

1. Mackay (80.2%)
2. Whitsunday and Bowen (19.8%)
3. Indigenous (Mackay 28.7%; Whitsunday/Bowen 3.5%), and
4. non-Indigenous (Mackay 51.4%; Whitsunday/Bowen 16.1%).

Carers were then categorised according to their identification as Indigenous or otherwise and their geographical location, and a stratified random sample was selected. The sample was proportionally representative of Indigenous and non-Indigenous carers in Mackay and the combined townships of Whitsunday and Bowen. Forty foster carers in total were randomly selected using this stratified random sampling method.

Other key informants were purposefully chosen based upon the focus of their organisation or their personal expertise and experience in child protection and/or out-of-home care. For example, Volunteering Australia, the body representing volunteers in Australia, was selected to gain that organisation's perspective on whether foster carers were considered to be volunteers within the accepted international definition of such. It was confirmed that they were not because foster carers receive reimbursement for costs outlaid in the course of their fostering role (Volunteering Australia 2004). This raises questions about the status of foster carers, which will be discussed following the presentation of the key research findings from the 61 interviews in this study.

## KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS

### FOSTER CARER DEMOGRAPHICS

The average age of all foster carers in this study was 46.2 years, the average age of Indigenous foster carers was 45.7 years, and the average age of all relative foster carers in this study was 55 years, indicating an approximate 10 year age range. The average educational attainment level for foster carers in this study was 9.5 years (range 5 – 12 years) which is just below that of the minimum acceptable school leaving level of 10 years in Queensland. Foster carers in this study had, on average, 8.1 years of fostering experience.

### FOSTER CARER TRAINING

In the study, 50% of all foster carers interviewed had not completed any pre-service or induction training prior to receiving their first placement. This group was mostly made

up of relative foster carers and three-quarters of the Indigenous foster carers. Excluding relative carers, most of the foster carers, at some time during their fostering career, did go on to undertake either the Sharing the Care pre-service foster carer training or some other one-off training session/s. However, of all foster carers in this study, 15% had *never* undertaken any foster carer training at all, neither induction training nor any other.

Relative foster carers stood out for their lack of training with only one relative carer ever having undertaken any training – a short, one-off session on behaviour management. Government foster carers, particularly those in the Whitsunday and Bowen areas, closely followed relative foster carers with regard to their lack of training and support received from the department.

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Despite the lower than average educational attainment levels of foster carers, this did not appear to negatively influence their desire to undertake further training. In fact, their desire for both initial and ongoing foster carer training was clearly established in this research. A major finding was that 98% of foster carers wanted training to be practically oriented and nationally accredited. Qualifications would thus be transferable and recognised within all Australian States and Territories so carers would not have to repeat training should they move interstate. They also wanted recognition of relevant prior learning and life experiences credited against any foster carer training they undertake and they wanted formal recognition through qualifications for the efforts they put into undertaking foster carer training.

There was also a strongly held belief that being 'qualified' would enable them to be treated with more respect, to have their views taken more seriously and to be listened to by departmental officers and other professionals with whom they come into contact in the course of their fostering role.

Significantly strengthening this finding was the fact that the other key informants also strongly supported these views in their interviews. All of those who were asked also thought that foster carer training should be accredited. The reasons given for these views were similar to those given by foster carers.

The desire for specialist training to provide treatment or therapeutic foster care was also well established in the research, with 65% of foster carers and 100% of key

informants who were questioned believing that there was a need for higher levels of specialist training for foster carers. They expressed the view that this was especially so given the nature and diversity of difficulties with which foster carers are confronted on a daily basis and especially when children with special needs or extremely challenging and difficult behaviours come into their care.

The opinion of both of the social science experts also supported this view. They believed that specialist foster carer training was 'essential' for foster carers if good outcomes for foster children are to be achieved. This is also a view supported by other research on this topic (Pecora, Whittaker, Maluccio, Barth & Plotnick 1992; Palmer 1995; Leahy, Little, Mondy & Nixon 1999; Barbell & Wright 2001).

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#### SUPPORT THROUGH PAYMENT FOR TRAINING

Eighty per cent of all foster carers wanted full reimbursement for *all* out-of-pocket expenses associated with their attendance at foster carer training. Thirty-five per cent thought they should also be paid to attend training and 15% thought they should be reimbursed for wages lost as a result of attendance at foster carer training. Only a small number were prepared to attend training for no financial recompense at all and these tended to be those foster carers who see fostering as a vocation.

Other key informants were very supportive of foster carers receiving stepped payment scales reflecting the level of training qualifications attained by them. They believed that foster children with commensurate levels of need should be matched with foster carers who had completed corresponding levels of training and whose personal attributes were most compatible with those of the child or young person. Admittedly, this would require the existence of a much larger pool of trained and qualified foster carers than currently exists from which to draw when undertaking such matching. This and a much broader range of placement options generally, other than foster care, were also areas of need strongly agreed upon by other key informants in this study.

#### TRAINING TOPICS

With regard to topics of training, the most often mentioned topic by non-Indigenous foster carers (65%) was dealing with and managing children and young people's behaviours. The second most cited topic by non-Indigenous foster carers (40%) was the need for more information about how to care for themselves and protect both themselves and their families from allegations of abuse made against them by the children in their care.

Indigenous foster carers most often mentioned the training topic of how to work with, communicate with, and deal with the Department (40%). Twenty-four per cent of Indigenous foster carers wanted more cross cultural training and a general 'Indigenisation' of all foster carer training curricula for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous foster carers.

Likewise, 'other key informants' confirmed the need to provide cross cultural information and training to all foster carers as well as to Departmental staff. Moreover, the point was made that any such cross cultural training should incorporate and emphasise a respect for culture and cultural differences, the importance of language and the distinctions between the respective cultural traditions of Aboriginal people, Torres Strait Islanders and Australian South Sea Islanders.

Other than these training topics, most others were very similar for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous foster carers across a broad range of topics which would more than account for the course content of any social welfare bachelors degree.

#### SUPPORT

Foster carers were asked what would be of most support to them in their fostering role. Most (97.5%) cited having a dedicated 24 hour contact service or helpline available to provide advice and assistance when they needed it, at any hour of the day or night.

Training also featured prominently as an area of support with 50% of foster carers stating that more training and specialist information would be most helpful to them. Other areas of support identified included:

- 40% wanted more support from the department
- 37.5% wanted more information about the child or children coming into their care to assist them to better care for the child's particular needs
- 27.5% wanted to be listened to by departmental officers
- 25% wanted to be respected and trusted by the departmental officers, and
- 22.5% wanted regular respite from the pressures of fostering.

Similarly, other key informants also identified most of these areas of support for foster carers.

However, another area of concern that was identified by other key informants relates to the voluntary status of the fostering role itself as it impacts directly upon foster carers' self perceptions and the expectations held of them by departmental officers and the broader community.

## VOLUNTEERISM AND PROFESSIONALISM IN FOSTER CARE

As mentioned previously, the national organisation representing volunteers in Australia clearly does not regard foster carers as volunteers as they do not strictly conform to the international definition of what constitutes a volunteer (Volunteering Australia 2004). Accordingly, the views of foster carers, as well as those of key informants, were sought on the nature of this voluntary role and whether fostering should be a more professional role accompanied by all the training, skills development and payment similar to that received by other professionals, and as argued for by leading practitioners and researchers in this field in Canada, the UK and the USA (Pecora, et al 1992; Hutchinson, Asquith & Simmonds 2003; Waldoock 2003).

### ROLE CONFUSION

Significantly, 80% of foster carers in this study believed that fostering should be a professional role requiring formal training, qualifications and commensurate payment with that of other professionals working in the out-of-home care field. Importantly, 82% of all female carers in this study believed that fostering should be seen as a professional role. Male foster carers were less inclined to think that fostering should be seen in this light; perhaps this is because caring for children has traditionally been seen as 'women's work' and as such many of the male foster carers may not consider this form of caring to be a 'professional' role (Wearing 1984). Alternatively, female foster carers may want the role, and therefore themselves, to be more highly regarded and valued and see the professionalisation of the fostering role as a way to achieve this. Whatever the reasons, it was widely acknowledged by foster carers in this study that the professionalisation of foster care would elevate its status and raise the standing of foster carers with departmental officers and other welfare professionals.

Despite this significant finding of the research, many foster carers also expressed a concern about their ability to fulfil a loving, caring role whilst also being seen as a professional. In response to this concern, one of the other key informants, who is also a foster carer, has perhaps summed it up best by saying:

... you can be a professional carer for kids and ten years down the track you can just love that kid and feel as committed to that kid and as attached to that kid as any

other carer, whether they be a volunteer looking after a child who has different sorts of needs or not (Australian Foster Care Association 2003).

Many of the other key informants identified the problem of the conflicting views on the role and status of foster carers which often creates a form of role confusion for them. They expressed the view that foster carers were often seen in several dimensions – as volunteers, as workers, as following a vocation, as professionals, or as something else altogether, eg, a parent, grandparent, uncle or aunt. The potential for such role confusion was thought by other key informants to be detrimental to both foster carers and foster children.

Other key informants expressed the view that there needs to be a clear delineation of the role and the identification and naming of its status in this regard. Furthermore, other key informants also thought that the fostering role should be linked to accredited and more highly specialised training, increased payments and better support for foster carers.

*Debate about the professionalisation of foster care has been scant in this country, but it is an issue that must be grappled with, and sooner rather than later, if we are to recruit and retain sufficient numbers of foster carers as well as maintain continuous quality improvement of the foster care system.*

Whilst the debate on the topic of professionalisation of foster care may continue for some time yet, role confusion is likely to continue for many foster carers. In turn, this creates unrealistic expectations of foster carers by departmental officers and other professionals in this field regarding what they can do, what they should be doing, what they are trained to do and what they are prepared to do.

Waldoock (2003) strongly argues that role confusion for foster carers affects not only retention of, and recognition for, foster carers, but more importantly, has significant implications for children in foster care and '(g)iven the importance of the foster home in the lives of children in care, it is inexcusable that we still have confusion over the proper role of foster parents in the child welfare system'. He asks, 'Are they volunteers? Are they 'clients' of child welfare agencies? Are they 'staff' of those agencies? Are they professionals?' (Waldoock 2003:2). This is an important issue which cannot be ignored any longer and one which hopefully can be progressed in this current climate of change in Queensland.

## CONCLUSION

A major finding of this research, and one omitted from the recommendations of the recent CMC Inquiry in Queensland, is that foster carers and other key informants want nationally accredited foster carer training. This means that the efforts which carers put into learning and enhancing their skills are duly recognised through the bestowing of nationally accepted qualifications, as is the case for just about anyone else who undertakes training these days.

Best practice in the foster carer training area also clearly indicates that accredited training should be linked to foster carer practice standards as already exists in the UK (National Foster Care Association 1999) and, in turn, that these are linked to scaled payment levels for foster carers. In fact, New Zealand has recently introduced nationally accredited foster carer training (Lawrence 2004).

This research has found that foster carer training needs to be competency based and practically oriented. Foster carers should receive recognition for prior learning and/or life experiences relevant to the studies they undertake. Also, foster carer training curricula should incorporate an integrated cross cultural approach to the training of all foster carers, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous.

Undoubtedly, such elevation and specialisation of foster carer training has implications regarding the professionalisation of foster care, including all the associated payments, skills development, valuing and respect which are associated with such status. Debate about the professionalisation of foster care has been scant in this country, but it is an issue that must be grappled with, and sooner rather than later, if we are to recruit and retain sufficient numbers of foster carers as well as maintain continuous quality improvement of the foster care system.

Research has proven that foster care provided by qualified and specialist foster carers greatly improves the quality of care and the future life outcomes for children in their care (Barbell & Wright 2001).

With all of this information to hand, it appears that it is now time, more than ever before, to 'up the ante' in relation to foster carer training. ❖

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