

Importance of Early Childhood Education Programs for Children in Foster Care:
Understanding Foster Parent Perceptions of Advantages and Disadvantages

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Abstract

Early childhood care and education (ECE) programs have a tremendous impact on a child's future. Previous research on ECE has been conducted examining impact of programs on children from low-income families but less has focused on children in foster care. The current study aims to understand foster parent perceptions of the benefits and disadvantages of ECE programs.

A purposive sampling method was used with foster parents (N=54) to gain an enriched understanding of their perceptions of ECE programs. Focus groups were conducted with foster parents and lasted one hour. All interviews were double transcribed and crosschecked to ensure accuracy. Further, all interviews were coded by two or more trained qualitative researchers to ensure interrater reliability using QSR N*Vivo 10 software.

Foster parents were able to describe a myriad of benefits of ECE programs including the broad benefits of education, support, and program characteristics. The disadvantages include program regulations and program characteristics. Foster parents also discussed that there is no disadvantage of ECE for children in foster care.

Results indicate that foster parents are aware of some of the benefits of ECE programs and also have opinions on the disadvantages of ECE programs. It is recommended that ECE providers and child welfare workers share the benefits of ECE programs with foster parents to increase ECE enrollment. It is also recommended that due to the many benefits of ECE programs for children in foster care, there is increased availability of ECE programs to increase enrollment and decrease children on waitlists for ECE services. Lastly, it is recommended that ECE providers and child welfare workers make efforts to decrease barriers of ECE engagement through addressing the known ECE disadvantages shared by foster parents in the current study.

Importance of Early Childhood Education Programs for Children in Foster Care:
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Introduction

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECE) is crucial to improving the lives of young children (Pears et. al, 2013). When children participate in ECE programs the outcomes are numerous and include positive impacts on the child, their families, and the community at large (Barnett and Ackerman, 2006). These early educational opportunities provide an essential learning environment that lay the foundation for learning critical concepts for children from birth to five years old (NEA, 2013). Children who are able to participate in ECE programs become exposed to new ideas, people, and places. According to Phillips and Lowenstein (2011), time in ECE is where positive, early development occurs, second only to familial settings. The experiences of early childhood occur during some of the most influential years of a young person's life (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000). Therefore, it is crucial to understand how ECE can impact the life of a young person.

This paper will discuss early childhood development and the importance of early experiences on the developing brain of the child. It will also review early childhood care and education programs in the United States and what is included in these programs to make them high-quality. This paper also examines the advantages and disadvantages that ECE programs have on children in poverty. Research on ECE programs have examined the benefits that early learning has on the developing brain, but many barriers are in place that prevent some young children to reap the benefits of ECE programs (Mitchell and Meagher, 2017). Thus, ideally ECE should be accessible for all children in the United States.

Early Childhood Development

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Birth to five years-old is a vital time to begin educating young children. It is the greatest time for children to absorb information and research indicates that language learning is strongest during these early years of development (Shonkoff, 2000). This stage of development presents the most foundational developments for children. Their cognitive, moral, and emotional abilities are rapidly developing and it is essential to support these early growth periods (Shonkoff, 2000). During this stage, young children are ready to learn and expand their knowledge with information that will contribute to their future educational experiences.

During early childhood, the brain is processing all experiences to construct meaning of occurrences in an individual's life. For example, a developmental theory from Jean Piaget discusses assimilation and accommodation in young children (Piaget, 1936). Adaptation refers to a child's adjustment to the world and it includes assimilation, using an existing understanding to deal with a new situation, and accommodation, when prevailing knowledge needs to be changed to deal with a new situation (Piaget, 1952; Wadsworth, 2004). This development continues from birth to adulthood. It is critical to positively interact with children during this time period because the learned processes and interactions can greatly impact the child in the long term (Shonkoff, 2000).

During infancy, the brain is hardwiring for life. Thus, these early experiences can change the trajectory of the child's life starting at birth. The Center for the Developing Child at Harvard University (2016) discusses concepts about child development that are crucial to early childhood learning, but most importantly outlines that the brain is actively forming during the time from birth to 3-years-old, which helps us understand the importance of early education and care for children.

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Early childhood brain architecture is a fascinating scientific concept that many researchers have worked to understand through blending neurological scientific discoveries and social-developmental concepts (Center for the Developing Child, 2016). It is a critical time for the development of high functioning skills related to both cognitive and social abilities. All experiences that occur from birth to three influence brain functioning and continue to influence the child into adolescence and adulthood because of the formed framework of genes and experiences from early childhood brain circuits (Center for the Developing Child, 2016). These first childhood experiences not only impact early life, but also can potentially impact the individual throughout their life span.

Need for Early Childhood Education

In the United States, ECE programs have developed into more comprehensive and beneficial services over the past century. To address how ECE has changed or improved over time, there must be an understanding of changing family patterns and broader policies. These contribute to the need of ECE programs and the actual service delivery of ECE programs in America. An increase in programs has caused an increase in research on the effects of ECE programs on certain groups.

Family life has transformed over several years and finding appropriate childcare has become increasingly difficult for many families (Essa, 2012). Families' necessity for childcare has stemmed from an increase of two-parent working families. In 1950, about 12% of mothers raising children under six years old worked, but by 2007 the number was 61% (Children's Defense Fund, 2000; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2008a). With more mothers working, childcare is required for young children.

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Two-parent working families are strongly impacted by work demands. According to Essa (2012), some families must move away from relatives who could provide childcare and support. Recently, relative care from the extended family, of grandparents, uncles and aunts, has declined (Essa, 2012). The change in this system of care leaves fewer people to care for young children and enhances the need for ECE. In the beginning of evaluating the importance of ECE programs, researchers discovered that childcare has become as essential to family structure and functioning as transportation or food (Scarr, Phillips, McCartney, 1990). Care and education is a necessity for children and families.

What is Included in ECE programs?

Early learning programs seek to achieve many goals for young learners. The most critical goals are to enhance early cognitive skills, school readiness, and socio-emotional development for children (Currie, 2001). While these goals directly impact the child, ECE programs also provide indirect benefits to families such as providing childcare or respite. Programs for young children are necessary because of the immense benefits they can have. These benefits include academic impacts, reduced child welfare referrals, linguistic development, kindergarten readiness, and decreased reliance on welfare or social programs (Barnett, 2006; Klein et. al, 2011; Belsky et. al, 2007; Barnett 1995). Most specifically, early childhood care and education programs include direct care for children as well as cognitive stimulation and learning (Currie, 2001).

Author, Eva Essa (2012) discussed what aspects are included in early childhood care and education and the difference that these components make in the program. One of the most critical pieces that Essa discusses is the importance of the staff at ECE programs - their qualifications, consistency, and ability to interact with children. All programs have different requirements for

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staff, but individuals who are trained in early childhood have proven to have more positive interactions with children (Arnett, 1987). In positive interactions, the staff is nurturing, positive, and responsible with interactions that aim to guide children (Burchinal et. al 2008). Guidance and interactions aid in positive development for young children.

As mentioned, the ability to work and interact with children is vital to the function of ECE programs. Within this component of ECE programs, the stability of the ECE workforce can be concerning. When care providers and educators are stable, children are engaged in appropriate interaction (Helburn, 1995). Unfortunately, research demonstrates that turnover is extremely high among ECE providers. At 30% per year, early childhood educator turnover is among the highest tracked by the U.S. Department of Labor and in one study, 75% of ECE providers leave their jobs after three years (U.S. Bur. Labor Statistics, 2008; Whitebook & Sakai, 2004). Improving provider stability is critical to maintaining ECE programs and ensuring positive interactions with young children.

Without an appropriate physical environment, care and education cannot be facilitated in an effective way. The most important idea in the physical environment is for it to be child-oriented (Essa, 2012). With this atmosphere, children are safe to play, learn, and explore while parents believe that it is a good place for their children to be. Even though children can still benefit from ECE programs, there has been growing research about high-quality ECE programs and the impact implementing those programs could have on children.

Community involvement is another component of ECE programs. To understand the importance of community involvement, examining the Ecological Systems Theory by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) can explain the expansive responsibility of the community to ECE. The individual is the one who is enrolled in the ECE program, the microsystem includes the

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individual's family and other immediate surroundings and the macrosystem includes the external environment, including policymakers (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). These three elements continually interact to impact the individual or the child.

Within the ECE setting, the macrosystem including social services, policymakers, media and politics can greatly influence the individual and their ability to enroll and interact with ECE programs. Most importantly, this macrosystem involvement impacts the delivery of services and implementation of regulations for the individual (Phillips and Lowenstein, 2011). Community context can also influence the microsystem by providing subsidies to families who enroll in ECE programs and financial costs of state funded ECE programs (U.S. Bur. Census, 2008). Overall, this aspect of ECE programs reflects the broad implications that society, families, and individuals have on care and education programs.

High-Quality ECE Programs

According to Phillips and Lowenstein (2011), evaluating quality in the ECE field is becoming increasingly important to researchers, specifically examining constructive developmental outcomes for young children. The combination of all the components discussed above creates high-quality programs for children (Essa, 2012). Mixing and including all of these components can be complex but including these components in ECE programs can increase quality level and directly influence children's interaction with ECE programs.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) promotes "high-quality early learning for all young children from birth through age eight, by connecting early childhood practice, policy, and research." Their organization focuses on supporting educators, families, and children ensuring dedicated workers delivering high-quality education. NAEYC implements an accreditation process ensuring the continuous research-based education

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with best practices. According to their website, accreditation was created to assist families in understanding the importance of quality in early learning programs (NAEYC). NAEYC plays a critical role in implementing high-quality programs for young children.

Benefits of ECE Programs

Academic benefits

ECE is most noted for the academic benefits that children receive from services. According to researchers, the academic effects of ECE begin immediately for the child (Barnett, 1998). Due to the children's preset ability to learn, they reap cognitive benefits quickly. Barnett (1995) discovered that children below the age of five who are enrolled in early childhood programs show an immediate improvement of IQ and achievement efforts. This short-term benefit of ECE programs begins a persistent track of academic improvement and achievement for children.

As mentioned, the benefits of ECE programs do not conclude after early childhood years. Advantages of center-based ECE present themselves in academic and cognitive skills first and foremost. Linguistic development is a benefit for children because they are interacting and speaking with trained educators and other participants (Belsky, Burchinal, Clarke-Stewart, 2007). Research indicates that language development, processing and usage is crucial in early childhood (Shonkoff, 2000). It contributes to later positive development and grade school readiness for children after their participation in ECE programs (Barnett, 1998). Lingual interactions can help facilitate development and encourage age-appropriate conversations among children, their parents, and ECE providers.

One study of long-term academic benefits discussed some of the most positive academic outcomes. Barnett (1995) discovered that young children post ECE program participation had a

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decreased need for special education classes, decreased grade repetition, and increased high school graduation rates. These research results highlight the long-term impact of ECE on children.

Impact of ECE on children living in poverty

Two extremely important studies have been performed to measure the outcomes of children who were raised in poverty and had access to high-quality ECE programs. The Perry Preschool Study (1962-1967) and the Abecedarian Project (1972-1977) studied children exposed to poverty and their experiences in high-quality ECE programs. These studies were groundbreaking in the area of ECE research with results reflecting numerous benefits to children. Specific results of the studies demonstrated impact on individuals, their families (microsystem), and the broader community (macrosystem). These studies prove the immense benefits of ECE programs for children in poverty.

The Perry Preschool Study provided three- and four-year-old African American children living in poverty with ECE programs to study the risk of school failure. This study had 128 children who participated with 64 receiving the ECE intervention and 64 in the control group who did not participate in ECE. The researchers, Lawrence Schweinhart, Helen Barnes, and David Weikart (2005), followed up with the individuals at age 27 and at age 40.

Researchers discovered important outcomes for the young children who participated in ECE programs at age 27 (Schweinhart et. al, 2005). Regarding educational attainment, individuals in the experimental group had a 44% higher graduation rate than the control group, completed almost one more year of schooling, and spent fewer years needing special education aids. Another important outcome focused on pregnancy occurrences in program participants.

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Results indicated a lower percentage of out-of-wedlock births and fewer teen pregnancies (Schweinhart et. al, 2005).

Researchers did another follow-up study when participants were 40-years old (citation). Results from this study included lifetime criminal activity and economic outcomes and indicated the impact that early childhood programs can have on the macrosystem. The experimental group was 46% less likely to service time in prison than the control group and a had a 33% lower rate for arrests involving violent crimes. Participants also had a higher monthly income and less dependence on government assistance. These outcomes impact multiple systems and researchers estimate that for every dollar spent during early childhood eventually spared seven dollars through employment rates and reduced crime (Schweinhart et al., 1993; Barnett, 1995).

The Abecedarian Project focused on the same interventions as the Perry Preschool Project but was intensive with treatment programs beginning as early as infancy (Campbell et al., 2002). Children in the experimental and control group had mothers who were on average 20-years-old with less than a high school degree. The intervention was an education and care program for young children with an intensive curriculum of 'educational games' underlining cognitive development and language skills (Sparling and Lewis, 1979, 1984, 2000). Follow-up studies occurred during young adulthood and at age 30.

The study on young adult outcomes from this project occurred when participants were 21-years old and showed impact in many areas. Cognitive scores, for example IQ scores, for the experimental group were significantly higher than the control group. Academic benefits were displayed in reading and mathematics ability with the treatment group having significantly higher skills than the control group. Another educational benefit from this project was in

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achievement. Young adults in the treatment group completed more years of school than the control group (citation).

Early intervention from the Abecedarian Project also had a dramatic impact on life-success for young adults (Campbell et al., 2002). Young adults who experienced the interventions were more likely to have skilled employment at 21-years old than the control group. Also, twice as many children were born to individuals in the control group than the treatment group. Social adjustment was also discussed by researchers who discovered that participants in the treatment group were less likely to abuse drugs and alcohol or commit crimes and misdemeanors.

Reduction of abuse

Benefits of ECE programs can have a lasting impact on children who participate in ECE programs. Research has examined treatment of children in and out of the home. One characteristic of ECE is its consideration as a sheltered alternative to other kinds of care that could be unreliable (Klein, 2011). As mentioned, ECE contains aspects of supervision and learning. With children enrolled in ECE programs, parents receive respite from the difficulty of caring for young children thus preventing parent-child conflict at home (Reynolds & Robertson, 2003). Less child abuse can prevent referrals to families for child welfare and potential entry in to the child welfare system.

Economic return

The benefits of ECE programs not only impact the individual system, but their families and the broader community of taxpayers in the macrosystem. Economists discovered that a high-quality ECE program can deliver a 13.7% per child per year return due to the aforementioned positive outcomes on education, health, behaviors, and employment; thus impacting taxpayers

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and the job market (Heckman et al., 2010; Garcia et al., 2016). This research has indicated that early funding of ECE programs can allow society to reap benefits of economic return for the lifespan of those who participate in ECE programs.

Due to several studies analyzing the costs and benefits of early childhood intervention, research has indicated that children, families, and the community can receive economic benefits (Heckman et al., 2010; Garcia et al., 2016; Campbell et al., 2002; Barnett & Ackerman, 2006). Given our current understanding of the multiple benefits of ECE, it seems logical that children in foster care would also greatly benefit from these programs. Children in poverty and children in foster care are both vulnerable populations. Early adversity has been linked to children in foster care potentially benefiting more from ECE services than the general population (Meloy & Phillips, 2012).

Access to ECE programs

ECE programs, much like general education, can be classified into public and private support. The amount of funding for programs can determine the curriculum and quality of programs (Essa, 1999). ECE facilities can operate for-profit and non-profit, but there is an overall increase in ECE programs that are supported by employers (Essa, 2012). These sources of funding can impact access and barriers to programs.

Most care and education programs are for-profit. This classification means that they are operated with a business model and potentially have stock, mergers, and participate in marketing strategies (Essa, 2012). Research has indicated that these childcare chains have infiltrated into almost every metropolitan area (Neugebauer, 1991). Not-for-profit programs are not focused on financial gain. Churches and religious organizations are common benefactors for early childhood programs (Essa, 2012). These sponsors can impact the curriculum and quality of programs.

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According to Essa (2012), employer-supported programs are rapidly being implemented across the United States to meet the distinctive needs of parents who work. This type of ECE program relates to the systems theory in that workplaces and families often interact creating a community network to meet the needs of employers, employee-parents, and children.

Workplaces also create alliances with local childcare centers to provide parents with vouchers or subsidies (Essa, 2012). This type of ECE program can be beneficial for all individuals seeking services.

Other programs are funded by the public sector, either federal government, state, or local agencies. Three of the most distinguished publicly funded programs are Head Start, Early Head Start and Universal Pre-School. In 1964, Head Start was implemented to disrupt the cycle of poverty to meet some of the needs of children under 5 and their families (National Head Start Association). Head Start programs are in every state and on estimation, these programs have provided services to almost 1 million preschoolers and since the beginning of Head Start, 27 million children have received services (Head Start Program Fact Sheet, 2010; 2014). Head Start also provides comprehensive services for families and children including dental, nutritional and health services searching for the possibility of food insecurity (National Head Start Association). The implementation of publicly-funded Head Start has assisted in facilitating early learning and meeting basic needs for several families.

Due to the success of Head Start, thirty years later Early Head Start was implemented to serve children who are under the age of three. As families received Head Start services, the public recognized the significance of a child's early years to enhance child development (Essa, 2012). Both Head Start and Early Head Start aim to provide high quality education and health for children and families with training mandates and required education levels (Head Start Fact

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Sheet, 2014). These publicly supported programs provide services for individuals and communities.

In recent trends, states have allocated parts of their budgets for early education programs. In the past two decades, a majority of states have funded prekindergarten programs for four-year-old children with risk factors to enhance early development and boost school readiness (Essa, 1999). Many states have shifted to offer universal preschool services to all families and children (Schumacher et al., 2005). Some states, including Oklahoma, offer universal preschool services to all families ensuring high-quality early programs. Although with any publicly supported program, funding can be limited and limited spots are available for children (Essa, 2012). Universal Prekindergarten can improve early childhood education and development with services assisting children and families.

Children in Foster Care

The Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2016) discusses the importance of the developing brain in children from zero to three. Toxic stress involves the persistent activation of stress responses without the protecting factor of nurturing or loving relationships (Center on the Developing Child, 2016). Exposure to toxic stress can diminish brain development and implement damages to neurological functions, socioemotional development, and learning capabilities (Garner & Shonkoff, 2012). Research has indicated that stress in early life or prenatally can have a lifelong impact on individuals' health and human development (Shonkoff & Garner, 2012).

Early adversity and toxic stress has the ability to impact all children, but children in the foster care system are susceptible to negative experiences that span multiple dimensions. Poverty (Needell & Barth, 1998), exposure to toxins prenatally (Astley, Stachowaik, Clarren & Clausen,

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2002), neglect and abuse (Chernoff, Combs-Orme, Risley-Curtiss & Heisler, 1994), and unstable providers (Rubin, O'Reilly, Hafner, Luan & Localio, 2007) are extensive negative experiences that impact young children. This early adversity can present several repercussions for children in foster care. Specifically, young children who encounter these difficulties may demonstrate cognitive, academic, and psychosocial problems (Pears and Fisher, 2005). Supporting young children through early intervention, like ECE programs, could alleviate future delays and problems.

Children in foster care can range from age zero to eighteen. Researchers have discovered that infants and toddlers are the most rapidly growing group of our nation's foster care population (Vig, Chinitz & Shulman, 2005). Children under six being the largest segment in the foster care system is concerning. It can be difficult for young children to overcome the emotional and physical consequences of abuse and neglect compared to older children (Klein, 2011). Because young children are more vulnerable to negative aspects associated with foster care, interventions can help prevent potential negative issues.

Children in foster care, especially young children, have many needs and can experience multiple delays and problems. According to research, professionals should be concerned about potential medical conditions and health problems (Vig, Chinitz & Shulman, 2005), long-term speech and language problems (Beitchman et al., 1996) and mental health disorders (Kaufman, 1991). These concerning risk factors should encourage child welfare workers and policymakers to attempt to meet the complicated needs of children in the foster care system with appropriate interventions.

With the mentioned complex needs of children in foster care, ECE programs can greatly benefit young children. Services like Head Start that provide wraparound intensive services for

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identifying needs, can prevent and intervene some of these aforementioned risk factors (Lipscomb & Pears, 2011). The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services designates that all children in foster care are qualified to enroll in Head Start and Early Head Start (U.S. DHHS, 2011). Unfortunately, some families have difficulty accessing these services. In 2016, there was 148,912 children under the age of five in the foster care system and 24,301 were enrolled in Early Head Start or Head Start (NHSA, 2016). These numbers present a disproportion that only 11.8% of eligible children were actually enrolled in these high-quality services. It is critical to increase the number of children receiving ECE services by making them more accessible for foster parents.

A major challenge for implementing any type of helpful service for children in foster care are specific policy challenges and collaborations among service providers. As mentioned previously, children in foster care are vulnerable and several entities must work together to provide services. Besides access to Head Start, attention to ECE services in the lives of foster children has been overlooked (Meloy and Phillips, 2012). Welfare workers balance cases and services and regulations from their supervisors. Often times, services focus on the safety of this vulnerable population rather than the well-being of the child which may include developmental services like ECE programs (Meloy and Phillips, 2012). A shift in focus is necessary for programs and services to realize that safety is vital but child well-being is equally important.

In reviewing this literature, it is evident that there is a need to examine what foster parents think is important for their foster children. Early Childhood Care and Education programs can greatly improve the well-being of children as discovered in examinations of the programs on children exposed to poverty.

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The researched advantages are numerous and last throughout the child's life. Early Childhood Care and Education programs for children in foster care can improve their lives and shelter them from negative outcomes often associated with time in foster care. Foster parents play a key role in ECE engagement therefore understanding their perspectives on ECE programs and barriers to accessing these programs is key to increasing enrollment and engagement.

Methods

Procedures

A purposive sampling method was used with foster parents (N=54). Family participants included foster parent caregivers who have had experience with ECE programs. A total of six focus groups were conducted. Foster family participants were contacted by phone to be recruited into focus groups. Focus groups were organized in locations convenient for families with a total of 54 foster family caretakers participating. Focus groups lasted from approximately 1 to 1.5 hours each with all groups conducted by a trained qualitative moderator and including a note taker to support the group as needed. All focus groups were double transcribed and cross-checked by qualitative team members to ensure accuracy. During transcription, all identifying information that could be linked to informants was removed.

Foster parent caregivers received a \$25 gift card to compensate them for their time participating in the focus group. Focus groups were conducted usually in the early evening with babysitting being provided as well as snacks or small meal provided for all participants. The study including evaluation methods were approved by the University Institutional Review Boards (IRB).

Focus Group and Individual Interview Guide Development

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The semi-structured focus group interview guide was developed by the lead qualitative researcher and reviewed by the qualitative research team. The purpose of the semi-structured guide was to assess foster parent perceptions of ECE programs to inform and improve services. The foster parent guide focused on gaining insight into participant thoughts on ECE programs, reasons for engagement and attrition in ECE programs, and knowledge of foster child priority enrollment in ECE programs.

Data Collection

All focus groups followed the same structure of collecting qualitative information. The groups were moderated by a qualitative researcher with note takers placed in each focus group to ensure that the group was managed and data was collected successfully. After reviewing and completing consent for participation, focus groups were conducted. For all focus groups a brief overview of the project was presented and any questions were answered.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis of the transcriptions was conducted using NVivo 10 software. A template approach (Patton, 2002) was used to identify broad themes within a selected sample of both the engaged and unengaged transcriptions. More specific themes were also identified and were coded as sub-codes within the broader categories with a codebook developed collaboratively by three trained qualitative researchers. Training in developing the coding scheme and codebook took approximately two days. Upon completion of the codebook two qualitative researchers coded every transcription separately using the created templates. Once coded, transcriptions were compared for inter-coder reliability. To assess for reliability, simple percent agreement was used between the two coders. Simple agreement is a commonly used method for assessing reliability in qualitative studies (Lombard, Snyder-Duch, & Bracken, 2002;

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Stemler 2004). A criticism of simple agreement is that it does not account for coding agreement that may occur by chance (Lombard, Snyder-Duch, & Bracken, 2002). However, answers given to the semi-structured questions in this study were plentiful, varied, and not always mutually exclusive to one code, making the probability of coding by chance more unlikely (Stemler, 2001). Average inter-coder reliability was over 85%.

Percentages were then calculated for every specific and broad theme within the transcription. First, the percentage was found for participants who made at least one comment about each particular theme. This allowed researchers to identify what proportion of participants spoke about a particular subject. Second, the percentage of total comments for each theme was calculated. This gave an indication of the emphasis that each theme received during the interviews. Themes are described in more detail in the results section.

Results

Results of the current study focus on perceptions of foster parents in regards to their experience with ECE programs. Focus group participants described the benefits (See Table 1) and disadvantages (See Table 2) of enrolling their foster children in Early Childhood Care and Education programs.

Perceived Advantages of ECE Programs

Foster parents reported the benefits of ECE programs on their own lives as well as the lives of their foster children. Themes that emerged regarding advantages of ECE programs for children in foster care included education, support, and program characteristics.

Theme 1: Education

The most significant benefit of ECE shared by foster parents was the education provided to children (46% of participants). Specifically, foster parents explained that ECE programs

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provide exposure and learning of crucial early academic concepts such as letter, number, shape, and color recognition and usage. This is critical to build an educational base for young children. Foster parents also explained that the academic skills children learn in the ECE setting can carry on to future learning. One foster parent stated:

“One of mine can count to 100—he’s only four. He knows all his shapes. They know all the sing along songs and it teaches them to interact with other children.”

Another benefit of ECE programs disclosed by foster parents was the preparation for later learning or the focus on school readiness (20% of participants). Foster parents explained that children in their care who are engaged in ECE programs receive the advantage of an early start before beginning kindergarten. This advantage of ECE programs can assist with allowing children in foster care to enter school at the same level and ability as other children which helps them begin with a strong foundation for learning. An example of a participant quote includes that ECE programs:

“...prepare(s) them (children in foster care) more for what they’re going to deal with when they actually start kindergarten and stuff, gets them a little ahead of the game.”

Theme 2: Support/Information

Participants also revealed they are supported by ECE programs. One of these support aspects is the provision of respite care for foster parents. Besides being caregivers, foster parents explained other roles and stressors they have like work. ECE programs provides respite which directly benefits the foster caregivers and the children in foster care. When caregivers are rested and relaxed, they are better able to manage the multiple demands of being a foster parent. Approximately 20% of foster parents identified respite as a benefit of ECE programs with a representative quote including:

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“The times for oneself too, because if you’re used up and drained out and you don’t have anything more to give, because our two they come roaring through the door I mean, I work full time also so it’s like... you need that time to yourself, psychological rest as much as physical.”

In terms of ECE supporting early childhood development, foster parents reported that ECE programs have supported children in their care by increased speech and motor skill development (16% of participants). Foster parents further explained that this early development occurs in ECE programs due to interactions with peers and adults, as well as a myriad of positive early learning experiences, like playtime with other young children and attention from speech therapists. Many foster parents reported that ECE programs provide this extra dimension of support for development that occurs at the program and continues at home.

Another element of support from ECE programs is support for children in foster care who have different educational needs. Several foster parents commented on ECE addressing special needs for young children, a focus that might potentially be overlooked if not enrolled in ECE programs. These programs support children with special needs by ensuring children have the support to learn and develop. Specifically, foster parents discussed access to both physical therapy and speech therapy as a benefit of ECE programs (16% of participants). This perceived advantage allows young children to stay on track developmentally with one foster parent sharing:

“...they released her from speech therapy and she is saying all her words correctly and just the confidence that she says ‘I can do it now.’ So good for her.”

Theme 3: Program Characteristics

Program characteristics can also enhance the potential for young children to learn. Days in ECE programs are organized for young children to learn a routine with foster parents

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describing the structure and scheduling of ECE programs being beneficial to children in foster care. Foster parents reflected that structure can provide security for children and increased adjustment as young children become aware of the time they leave for ECE programs, who is picking them up, and who will be present at the program. This consistency within their schedule was reported to reduce anxiety and give children a positive environment to look forward to. One foster parent shared that the structure of ECE programs benefits children in foster care by:

“They learn structure, that structure is important not just at home. We have structure, we have rules but I try very hard to focus on childcare programs that reinforce the same times of things at home that I do ... wash your hands before you do things, cover your mouth when you cough-- those little things are very important and I want them reinforced in the environment they are in...it is structure and that helps them everywhere they go.”

Foster parents also described the significant benefit of ECE programs positively impacting the development of social skills. Specifically, foster parents indicated that ECE programs allow the child to socialize with other children (44% of participants). Participants reflected that children in foster care can have limited interaction with other children and attending an ECE program can help them to learn appropriate play, practice using their language skills, and prepare them for attending public schools through focusing on school readiness. Foster parents specifically discussed that some children in foster care did not have early experiences that nurtured socialization skills. Through attending an ECE program, foster parents indicated that children were able to learn and practice early social skills needed for later success. An example quote includes:

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“Well for us, (child) came from ... a neglected parenthood. Her parents basically neglected her. So for the first three years there was no parental guidance hardly at all. ...so, the advantage we found was she could learn socialization and that was the big thing because where we live unfortunately there are no younger kids her age in our neighborhood, so the only socialization she gets is through the daycare and Pre-K and HeadStart, so that was the big advantage for us was socialization...”

Perceived Disadvantages of ECE Programs

Foster parents also reported some disadvantages to sending children in foster care to ECE programs. Themes emerged regarding program regulations, program characteristics, and ECE not having disadvantages for children in foster care.

Theme 1: Program Regulations

Foster parents face several challenges in caring for children in foster care. While they do get some support, supports and resources are not always convenient or accessible. Foster parents described the hours of the ECE program as a disadvantage (11% of participants). Specifically, foster parents described that the hours of ECE programs as not being flexible and not fitting well with foster parent work schedules. It was described that some ECE programs often begin in the morning and only last half a day. Foster parents commented that the hours of the program can be a barrier for their own work success and keeping a suitable job. An example participant quote includes:

“That’s kinda like why I lost my job because I work evenings. you don’t find too many day cares, there’s no daycares at night.”

Foster parents reported that some programs require a certain level of income to qualify for the program. This income-based qualification can deter foster families from considering ECE

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programs for their foster children. Another regulation of ECE programs is the waitlist that prevents families from enrolling their children. Class-sizes are also a reported disadvantage. Finally, parents reported attendance policies as a disadvantage. Specifically, one parent said:

“For some programs, you can only miss one or two days.”

Theme 2: Program Characteristics

Due to the diversity of children included in ECE programs, some parents mentioned that young children can be exposed to negative behaviors from peers (11% of participants). ECE programs like Head Start and Early Head Start are inclusive programs (USDHHS, 2015). It is important to expose children to all types of learners, but parents commented that negative behaviors and language can be modeled by other children which poses a concern to the foster parent. These behaviors can impact a foster parent’s belief in ECE programs with one foster parent sharing:

“Other issues are some of the other children may have behavioral issues that your child may pick up on. There may be some communication issues as far as speech impairments that your child may start exhibiting as well.”

Foster parent participants also discussed that one perceived disadvantage of sending a child to ECE programs is the cleanliness of the ECE setting (9% of participants). This disadvantage could impact the young child and their entire family. Specifically, foster parents mentioned that if one of their children gets sick, then they all get sick. An example quote shared is:

“Things that make it kinda hard for the early childhood programs would be sicknesses. I mean when you put your child in daycare they’re exposed to more stuff and especially if they [are] foster children sometimes their immune systems are already compromised.”

Theme 3: Not a disadvantage

The benefits of ECE are numerous and widely known by professionals, educators, and parents. Foster parents who participated in this research study were asked perceived advantages and disadvantages of ECE programs with some families reporting there were no disadvantages to ECE programs for their foster children (9% of participants).. This result demonstrated that some foster families see the overall benefit to children attending ECE programs and had no known barriers to attendance. . An example quote that echoes families with no disadvantages to ECE includes:

“I can’t think of a disadvantage at all.”

Discussion

It is important to understand foster parent’s opinions of ECE programs as they are a key factor in ensuring that children in foster care enroll and attend ECE programs. The current study provides insight regarding foster parent perceptions of what influences their participation in ECE programs. Emergent themes are organized regarding advantages (see Figure 1) and disadvantages (see Figure 2) of ECE programs as shared by foster parents. Sub-themes emerged under the primary themes of advantages and disadvantages of ECE programs. Related to the theme of ECE program advantages, sub-themes emerged regarding education, support/information, and program characteristics. Sub-themes for disadvantages of ECE programs included program regulations, program characteristics, and not a disadvantage. The framework for these results allow programs to enhance their offerings and change some aspects to support children in foster care and their caregivers.

Perceived advantages of ECE programs

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ECE programs provide many benefits to children in foster care. Results from the current study demonstrate education as the most identified advantage of ECE programs. The two sub-themes of advantages are early learning of academic concepts and school readiness. Education provided during ECE programs assist children in developing a foundational learning experience including counting and learning the alphabet. Research demonstrates the benefit of education is not just short-term but can impact future educational experiences like performance in math in high school or participating in special education programs (Barnett, 1998, 2006). Early learning experiences establish a groundwork for future academic participation.

Theme 1: Education

Early learning of academic concepts

ECE programs include a focus on learning, care and healthy development (Currie, 2001). Foster parents acknowledge the importance of children in foster care learning shapes, colors, numbers and letters. Research indicates that ECE can greatly benefit children especially children in high-risk situations (Pears et. al, 2013; Pears & Fisher, 2005). Teaching early learning concepts in ECE greatly impacts children in foster care by providing them with confidence and support in their future academics. Related to academic concepts, foster parents recognize that children who participate in ECE programs are prepared for future learning, specifically mentioned was kindergarten.

School readiness

ECE is composed of activities preparing children for future academic settings. School readiness refers the preparation level of young children for future school settings. ECE was created because of what research demonstrates about early brain development (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Children should be exposed to learning opportunities at a young age before pre-k

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or kindergarten because of the critical brain development occurring and potential to apply learning concepts to future academic settings (Hart & Risely, 1995). As demonstrated in the results, foster parents reported that children in ECE programs are more prepared for academic learning in elementary schools due to the academic influences during ECE programs.

Theme 2: Support/Information

As reported by foster parents, parents and children in foster care receive support and information from participation in ECE programs. Sub-themes that emerged regarding support/information involve respite provided for foster parents, support for early childhood brain development, and support for special needs. According to the Harvard Center on the Developing Brain (2016), all environments can have enduring impact on a child's future school and life success. Vocabulary differences begin to exist in children as early as 18 months and can be explained by familial experiences or access to ECE services (Belsky et. al, 2007). These disparities can be detrimental to young children who do not have access to educational programs. Disturbances in early brain development can prevent successful learning in school and individual contexts (Dawson, Hessel & Frey, 1994). As discussed in the results section, children in ECE programs receive support which can mitigate the impact of early adverse experiences.

Early childhood development

Research has also focused on the critical learning experiences and brain development that occurs during early childhood (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Phillips & Lowenstein, 2011; Currie, 2001). Another aspect of support in ECE is the promotion of early childhood development. It is clear that ECE programs facilitate that critical early development. Specifically, foster parents discussed that ECE services provide support for brain development and formation. When children's developmental needs are not met inside the home, they are met with support from

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alternative forms of care like ECE programs. Children in foster care can benefit from additional care and education.

Special needs support

In the current study, foster parent responses indicated the positive impact of ECE in children getting needed supports related to special education. Research has indicated that children in foster care are vulnerable to development issues without proper prevention and intervention strategies (Barnett, 1998). This research also describes that ECE interventions can mediate participation in special education classes when a child gets older. Some ECE programs provide support for developmental disabilities and speech issues. Specifically, foster parents discussed the critical role that speech services can have in the lives of their foster children. The support for special needs provided by ECE programs is an important benefit for children in foster care and should be stressed to families through ECE providers and child welfare workers.

Respite for foster parents

The benefits of ECE programs apply not only to the children in foster care, but also to the foster parents through providing respite care. Results indicate foster parents are supported by ECE programs by receiving respite while their child is in care. Being a foster caregiver presents numerous challenges which includes the stress of balancing the role of parent to high-risk children (Brown & Calder, 1999). ECE supports foster parents by giving them rest, specifically a break from childcare duties. During this time, foster parents mentioned they have time to complete work and spend time catching up on other activities. With this critical rest period, foster parents are able to provide increased nurturing and support for their child(ren).

Theme 3: Program Characteristics

Provides structure

Characteristics of ECE programs, specifically the function and structure, also were described as a benefit for young children. Sub-themes of program characteristics involve the structure of ECE programs and socialization for children in foster care. Specifically, foster parents mentioned that constructing a schedule is helpful for the child(ren) in their care. For example, with routines children know what time to wake up, when to eat breakfast, and when school starts and ends. Children in foster care have encountered many negative life events and can experience a lack of consistent structure surrounding their everyday activities (Leve et. al, 2012). ECE programs assist children and foster parents by providing consistency and routine for every day. Research indicates that everyday routines can give vulnerable children a sense of security (Bruskas, 2008). Foster parent participants in this study recognize that ECE program structure is a positive influence for children in foster care.

Socialization

Another program characteristic benefit is the development of social skills and experiences of socialization in the ECE setting. According to foster parents, social skills are important in the lives of their children and ECE programs provide those important interactions. Specifically, these skills include play and language usage among peers. Exposure to positive social influences during ECE programs improves the lives of children in foster care. Socialization allows young children to learn communication and develop relationships. Children in foster care benefit from socialization because they receive support outside of the family setting, where attention and nurture could be lacking (Dawson et. al, 1994). Social interactions in ECE settings assist children in developing relationships and learning communication with peers.

Perceived disadvantages of ECE programs

Foster parent participants discussed what they did not like about ECE programs for children in foster care. Sub-themes of program regulations and program characteristics emerged as potential disadvantages for children in foster care. Specific program regulations reported by foster parents are hours of program, income requirements, attendance policies, waitlist, and large-class sizes. Understanding the identified disadvantages in this framework allow for programs to develop favorable regulations to children in foster care and foster parents.

Theme 1: Program regulations

Hours of program

Hours of ECE programs vary but can be limited to half-day programs or programs that are only three days a week (Scarr et. al, 1990). ECE programs operate on schedules that are not always favorable to the busy lives of foster parents. Specifically, foster parents reported that hours of program should align with foster parent's needs, so they can work and be caregivers. This disadvantage can prevent foster parents from receiving the mentioned benefit of support, if ECE programs regulate their hours of operation.

Other regulations

Large-class sizes were also recognized as a disadvantage to ECE programs. Children in foster care often require specialized attention due to previous lack of nurture and neglect (Bruskas, 2008; Chernoff et. al, 1994). From the perception of foster parents, children in foster care would benefit more from ECE programs with smaller class sizes. A characteristic of high-quality ECE programs is low caregiver to child ratio which also promotes stability for ECE educators (Whitebrook et. al, 2004). Ensuring that early childhood educators and administrators

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tend to the educational needs of young children could prevent large-class sizes being considered a disadvantage.

Waitlists and income requirements vary by program. Typically, non-profit ECE programs operate on an income-based enrollment (Essa, 2012). If a family's income is higher than a specified amount, then they will not qualify to enroll their children in ECE programs. According to Essa (2012), programs that are income-based typically have the longest waitlists and require early action for enrollment. Foster parents perceive these regulations as disadvantages for their children because they may not meet qualifications for ECE programs.

Theme 2: Program characteristics

Cleanliness

Characteristics of ECE programs include the day to day function and structure of programs. The cleanliness of an ECE program is a major indicator of a foster parent's perception of the program. Specifically, foster parents discuss that children can be exposed to germs at ECE programs because of the interaction with other children. Foster parent participants also talked about their personal experiences of having multiple children in their home and the illness being spread throughout the whole home environment. Research shows that children in foster care can be at risk for a lower-functioning immune system and become sick more often than other children (Needell & Barth, 1998). Foster parents' identification of potential exposure to illness demonstrates the importance of clean and safe learning spaces for young children enrolled in ECE programs.

Socialization

Socialization occurs within play and communication settings among peers in ECE programs. Some ECE programs, like Head Start, include children with different learning abilities

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and behaviors (Essa, 1999). Foster parents in this study recognized that a negative aspect of socialization can occur in these early learning settings. Some young children demonstrate bad behaviors or use bad language in the classroom. From the perspective of foster parents, children can learn those bad behaviors in ECE programs. Children in foster care could carry learned bad behaviors, such as bad language, from ECE back into the home challenging foster parents.

Theme 3: Not a disadvantage

Some foster parents did not identify any negative aspect of ECE programs. When asked about disadvantages of children in foster care attending ECE programs, foster parents reported that there would not be any disadvantages to their children. Numerous research studies demonstrate the positive impact that ECE can have on children, especially those in high-risk situation (Belsky et. al, 2007; Campbell et. al, 2002, 2012; Schweinhart, 2004; Schweinhart et. al, 2005). With foster parents identifying that ECE is not a disadvantage for their children, it is evident that some foster parents clearly see the positive impact of ECE.

Conclusions

The current research uses a qualitative approach to delve into the perceptions of foster parents who are raising children in foster care that are eligible for ECE programs. Data indicates perceived benefits and disadvantages of enrolling children in foster care in these early learning programs. Foster parents described several factors that influence if an ECE program can be beneficial for children in foster care. Education was the most widely recognized benefit, but foster parents also recognize that regulations of the program influence enrollment in programs. The current research on foster parent perceptions of ECE programs has significant effects for early childhood educators and administrators. Early childhood educators must ensure that children are experiencing the education opportunities that can benefit them, while administrators

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must be aware of class limitations and structures that can negatively impact children in foster care.

Socialization is a broad theme for both benefits and disadvantages. In benefits, the interactions among young children influence their ability to communicate and play. Research shows that children in foster care could lack exposure to a nurturing environment from their biological parents (Dawson et. al, 1994). Therefore, receiving additional positive interactions in the academic setting can be beneficial for young children. Alternately, foster parents also indicated that sometimes this socialization in the classroom can be a disadvantage to children in foster care, specifically in learning bad behaviors or language from peers. Teachers must mediate behavior in the classroom to make sure young children are influenced by positive peer interactions, so that bad behavior does not become learned.

Another recognized disadvantage is large class sizes which can also impact a teacher's ability to prevent negative socialization in the classroom. With large class sizes, educators have limited attention to the social interactions in the classroom. Smaller class sizes could potentially decrease the influence of bad behaviors and negative language in the classroom that is considered a disadvantage to foster parents.

Limitations

It is important to interpret these findings with consideration to limitations. One limitation is from the participants. Foster parent participants bring outside influence of their previous experiences into their responses. Specifically, previous interactions with ECE programs can influence a foster parents' answers either positively or negatively. Another limitation is within the setting of focus groups. Sometimes focus group participants feel uncomfortable in sharing information or opinions in front of other participants who they may not know very well. To

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negate this possible limitation, qualitative researchers discussed the importance of confidentiality and the process of ensuring confidentiality throughout the transcribing, coding, and reporting of data. Another possible limitation was foster parents being recruited for their general experience with ECE programs, and not interviewing families that were involved with each specific ECE program type. The current project was conducted through recruiting from general ECE involvement due to the inability to recruit large numbers from each type of ECE programs, even so, this could potentially impact the generalizability of results and should be considered. This possible limitation is offset by the large number of families that were interviewed (N=54) and consistent themes emerging across families and types of ECE involvement.

Future Directions

After taking into consideration the current results, an area for increased research is mental health needs for children in foster care. Using measures to examine vulnerability and trauma can improve the lives of young children in foster care with an increased understanding of how ECE might mediate negative outcomes of traumatic experiences in foster care. Also, taking a closer examination of child outcomes and the impact of ECE can allow for recognition of the gaps in services for foster children within an ECE setting. Children in foster care can largely benefit from ECE programs, but foster caregivers must have the resources and ability to enroll their children in programs. Therefore, future directions should also focus on additional research in understanding what prevents foster parents from enrolling children in ECE programs.

As discussed, ECE programs can greatly impact child development, future education, and community policy. It can also have a monumental economic impact on individuals and society. ECE programs support children by providing learning experiences that enhance future academic and employment opportunities. Research indicates that ECE programs provide economic return

to society with increased employment of individuals who participated in ECE programs (Heckman et. al, 2010). Policymakers should be aware of the impact that ECE programs and participants have on society in the future by providing programs with accessible regulations for foster parents. It is recommended for policy to be implemented so that all children have improved access to programs that work with schedules and community structure.

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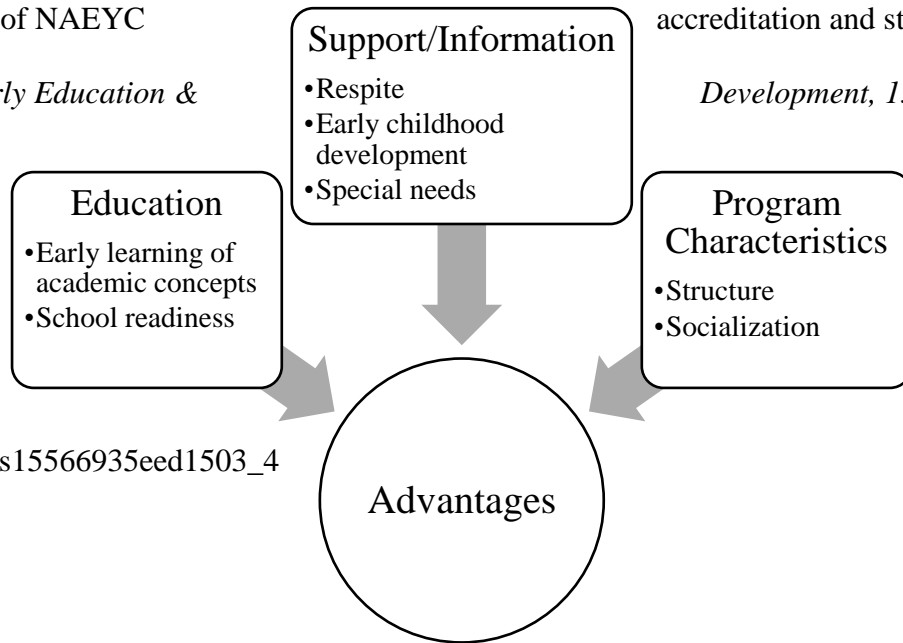
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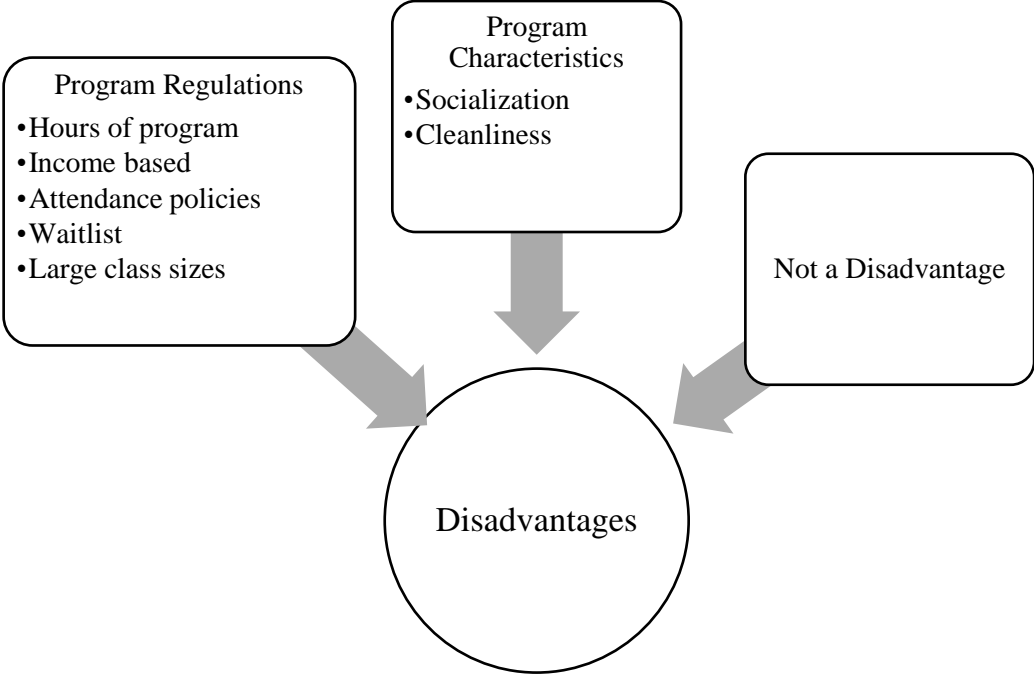


Appendix A

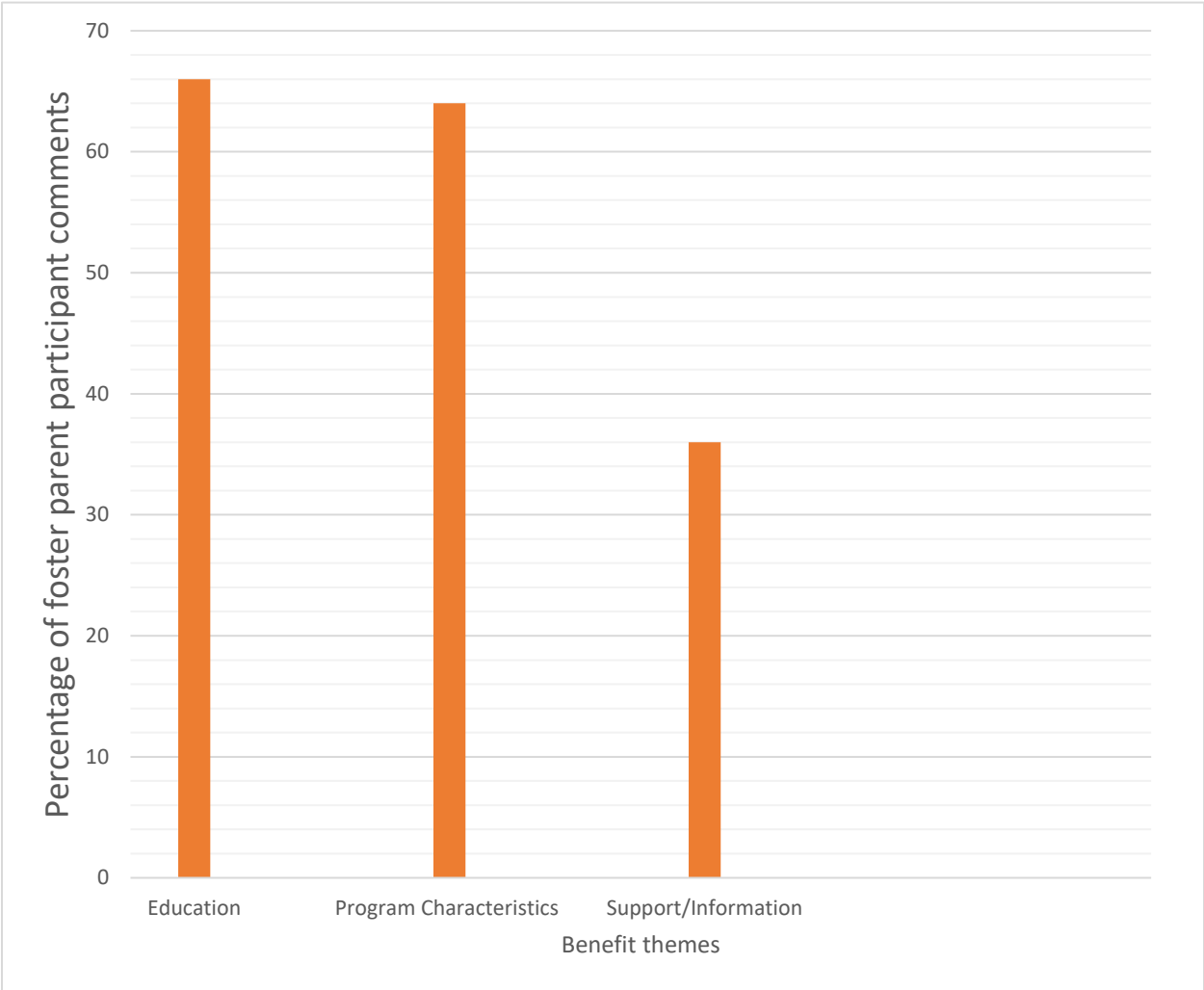
Figure 1: Emergent Themes: Perceived Advantages of ECE Programs

Appendix B

Figure 2: Emergent Themes: Perceived Disadvantages of ECE Programs



Appendix C: Table 1. Perceived Benefits of ECE Programs



Appendix D: Table 2. Perceived Disadvantages of ECE Programs

