

QUALITATIVE SERVICE REVIEW AS A LEARNING STRATEGY FOR CHILD
WELFARE PRACTICE IMPROVEMENT

by

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ABSTRACT

The mission of public child welfare agencies is to help children grow up in families that can provide safety, permanency and well-being. Child welfare systems are notoriously complex and workloads heavy, but all participate in evaluation with the goal of continuous practice improvement. The Qualitative Service Review (QSR) is a tool designed to provide feedback about case practice and to identify trends influencing practice. Feasibly, QSR cannot be performed on every case, so an important element of its utility is the degree to which workers can apply learning from one case to others. Little is known about frontline workers' experiences with QSR and how these reviews influence application of QSR generated knowledge and practice. Fourteen frontline workers in three state child welfare agencies participated in individual interviews about their experience with QSR and its influence on their practice. This study uses a qualitative descriptive method to describe perceptions of QSR and practice learning. Findings suggest that workers perceive QSR as a practice improvement strategy as well as an evaluation, that it requires a significant time investment, and that it highlights areas of opportunity where best practice expectations can be articulated more fully. Additional themes about the practice environment emerged. Workers described their emotional investment in practice and their perceptions that multiple systems influence practice. The neoliberal influence on public agencies could be heard in participants' observations that the child welfare work environment is changing from one that measured performance through interaction with families to one that promotes accountability by data collection. These findings have implications for

child welfare practitioners and administrators, researchers, staff responsible for conducting QSR reviews, and social work educators.

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CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

Child welfare services are complex. Those who practice direct service in public child welfare agencies primarily work with resource-limited families in perpetually resource-limited human service environments. Their tasks are numerous, requiring use of clinical skills to engage and assess families in difficult situations while completing administrative tasks related to data entry, case recording, writing court reports, and completing decision-making tools and assessment instruments. The underlying goal of these tasks is to ensure child safety, permanency, and well-being, goals that are generalizable in the abstract but the mechanics of which are unique within each family circumstance. Each family situation is different, and planning and services designed to meet the individualized needs of each family are the cornerstone of the family-centered practice model (Sudol, 2009). At the same time, states are expected to work toward aggregate outcome measures of safety, permanency, and well-being using state-level data points, such as length of stay and number of placements (Shackelford, Harper, Sullivan, & Edwards, 2007). In other words, child welfare systems and the direct service staff within them are responsible for successfully producing change in people, but are frequently evaluated with measures of task completion and process (Hasenfeld, 1972; Smith & Donovan, 2003).

Evaluation processes should result in increased knowledge – their essential purpose is to answer a question about how well a program is functioning, or “what’s really going on” (Patton, 1998, p.1). Meaningful evaluation of complex systems should not simply present quantitative

outcome measures (Hoole & Patterson, 2008; Martineau & Preskill, 2008). These represent the results of already-done practice. Meaningful evaluation in agencies tasked with achieving the more abstractly conceptualized ideas of safety, permanency, and well-being should also increase knowledge about ways to improve practice and system strategies (Goerge & Wulczyn, 1996; Kerman, Freundlich, Lee, & Brenner, 2012). Understanding how evaluation processes contribute to learning about practice is an important piece in understanding how to most effectively implement, support, and measure best practices in complex systems. Through the research described here, I sought to understand (1) child welfare workers' and supervisors' experiences of being evaluated with a qualitative case review process that uses stakeholder feedback, (2) what the workers and supervisors learned from this experience, and (3) how participating in a qualitative evaluation process informed subsequent child welfare practice.

Key Terms

Public child welfare system refers to the state government agencies responsible for administering state child welfare services. These vary from state to state based on differences in state government, organization, degree of privatization, and other factors. For purposes of this paper, these agencies refer to a state's "IV-E" agency, or the entity that receives federal grant money for child welfare. *Child Welfare Outcomes* are a specific set of seven goal-based statements used by The Department of Health and Human Services to reflect the desired changes in child welfare practice and system functioning as measured by the quantitative performance measures. *Qualitative case reviews* are reviews of individual cases that use interviews with stakeholders and synthesized narratives as the primary data sources for analysis. Different states use different names for these types of reviews, including Qualitative Case Review (for example, Utah) and Quality Service Review (for example, Tennessee, Alabama). These reviews focus on

the quality of implementation of a state system's practice model and inform assessment of *Practice Outcomes*. *Practice Outcomes* refer to the system goals of safety, permanency, and well-being, as well as more state-specific practice model outcomes, for example, engagement with families, assessment, and planning.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study developed from my experience in child welfare. By this, I mean that my work experience introduced me to processes that I believe merit in-depth study within social work. My experiences also sensitized me to concepts such as pragmatic qualitative research, evaluation capacity building, and learning processes that are particularly suited to study of qualitative reviews in child welfare. I believe the potential exists for the qualitative case review process to help agencies evaluate their practice while fostering desired practice change in a manner consistent with the principles embraced in family-centered practice. A key concept behind this is that learning for future performance occurs during practice evaluation processes. A pragmatic philosophical approach informs the research interest in qualitative case reviews. This research is designed to describe experiences that could contribute to the development of future research hypotheses and improve future evaluation implementation. By honing in on how the experience of participating in a qualitative review is a learning experience for future practice, this research will add first person experience from the field into the literature about performance evaluation and learning strategies for child welfare practice improvement.

In complex child welfare systems, the perfect relationship between cause and effect is often elusive. There are many variables to consider, and these systems have little control over the environment in which they work. In addition, it is often very difficult to create the

counterfactual circumstances necessary for research using an experimental design (Drury, 2014; Anderson, 2009). In organizational behavior theories, an important idea is that it is necessary to consider both the context in which change is occurring and the feedback informing it to understand the process of change. (Lewin, 1997; Burnes, 2004; Mitchell, 2013). Therefore, qualitative research designs that use experiences of workers in these child welfare systems as their data are particularly appropriate for study in these systems.

Preston (2013) found that outcome-focused, worker-specific data is motivating when given in a way that helps workers achieve desired outcomes or improve their own performance. The idea of “evaluation capacity building,” in which evaluation teams incorporate coaches to increase motivation as well as knowledge and skills in frontline practitioners, comes from the evaluation profession and is not meant specifically for human serving fields (Ensminger, Kallemeyn, Rempert, Wade, & Polanin, 2015). However, in organizations that are supportive of developing a learning culture, coaching models that are supportive, goal-driven, and use teachable moments can increase motivation (Ensminger et al., 2015). Characteristics of coaches in this model align well with best practices in child welfare supervision and can be applied to qualitative case review processes (Salus, 2004). The information-gathering, analysis, and feedback elements of qualitative case review processes could provide opportunities to embed these factors that support learning and transfer through an evaluative process. Indeed, change management strategies invoking assessment, planning, implementation, and evaluation at the organizational level echo practice models at the frontline level; practitioners apply these change management strategies for family systems in the course of frontline work (Mitchell, 2013).

Several assumptions underlie this research proposal, and these assumptions are based upon my personal experience with the QSR process. I worked for ten years in quality assurance

at a public child welfare agency. That agency uses aggregate administrative data and checklists to evaluate agency performance and it also uses a QSR, an individualized qualitative review process to assess case practice. The QSR process uses individual cases as the foundation unit of analysis, with pairs of reviewers interviewing major actors in a case: families, youth, foster parents, caseworkers and supervisors, service providers, and attorneys. The interviews follow a semi-structured format but are quite open-ended and tailored to the specific role of each respondent. After the interviews, reviewers prepare case-specific feedback for the worker and supervisor and then present the case to management staff in a presentation-style format. From this review, reviewers produce case-specific narratives and county/regional administrators generate next steps for the administrative level. This process draws from classic qualitative analysis methods, by interviewing participants to glean their narrative of the case.

In my role, I was responsible for organizing and implementing QSR reviews as well as analyzing and presenting the data in written reports. I also participated as a reviewer in many cases, and as part of that process I interviewed many stakeholders and provided feedback about case practice to case managers and supervisors. I observed workers expressing relief, bewilderment, or indifference after receiving feedback. I built working relationships with staff who embraced the QSR process, as well as those who resisted it. From this experience, my coworkers and I observed that this resource-intensive process made an impact on the people participating in it, and this impact led to much thought and discussion about cases and systems. Catch-22's and paradoxes encountered in practice were turned over and over, as staff searched for ways to apply assessment and planning principles more effectively. Sometimes this thinking began in the interviews – during the process of the review itself – before the case analysis was put together or feedback was given.

The QSR process is based upon the primary assumption that first-person experiences of child welfare case participants are important sources of information about child welfare system and practice performance. Following that is the assumption that organizing this first-person information can guide practice and system improvement. This type of information captures perspectives about casework that describe the way decisions are made in the case and the effect those decisions have on that particular child and family. This individualized assessment information can be synthesized to form a picture of strengths and opportunities for improvement around case practice and system performance. Disaggregating performance outcome measures to try to gain an understanding of individual practice is no easy task, so a key assumption of QSR is that this narrative information can be useful to learning at the individual practice level as well as at the administrative, system-oriented levels of a child welfare organization.

The question I pursued in this study emerged from the idea that the QSR evaluation process can serve to inform child welfare practice and systems. Little is known about how this occurs, and my goal in this study is to systematically analyze experiential narratives about QSR participation by child welfare staff to identify and describe perceptions of the ways that the QSR process influences subsequent case practice. The purpose of this study reflects my pragmatic worldview, as the question is ultimately directed at understanding the ways learning might manifest in the practice world. I believe research can illuminate ways that these processes may be used more effectively in supporting best practice in child welfare. I believe this research has the potential to help agencies use this resource-intensive process in a manner that is consistent with principles of supportive supervision and knowledge transfer.

Research Questions

The purpose of this research is to explore the experiences of direct practice staff (case workers and supervisors) who have had a case reviewed with the QSR process, and to assess how they use the QSR process as a learning tool to affect practice. I am interested in understanding perceptions of how the QSR process influences learning, decision-making, and ultimately practice and how case managers and supervisors apply information learned through QSR. I believe this research has the potential to help agencies use this resource-intensive process in a manner that is consistent with principles of supportive supervision and knowledge transfer. I believe there is potential for the QSR process to not only help agencies evaluate their practice, but help foster desired practice change in a way that is consistent with the principles embraced in family-centered practice. Little is known about the first-person experience of participating in a qualitative case review process, but this is a vital perspective to explore in order to increase understanding of qualitative evaluation and any impact on future practice. The following research questions emerge that could help fill that gap in information:

1. How do child welfare workers and supervisors perceive the QSR process?
2. How do child welfare workers and supervisors perceive the relationship between the QSR process and best practice?
3. What do workers and supervisors see as beneficial/ineffective about the QSR as a learning process about best practice?
4. How do workers and supervisors describe the ways QSR participation influenced their casework, in a specific case or general manner?

CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review is presented in two parts. In the first, the context of qualitative research strategies in child welfare evaluation is described. Current strategies that are used in public child welfare evaluation are discussed in order to describe the benefits and the challenges provided by national public child welfare evaluation strategies. As these strategies evolved, family-centered practice models emerged, and the manner in which family-centered practice became incorporated into evaluation strategies is discussed. An in-depth description of the QSR is provided in this section. Finally, a review of the research literature into qualitative child welfare evaluation strategies presents information about this research approach and the information it produces.

The second section of the literature review discusses theories and models that describe the process of organizational learning and supportive supervision in child welfare systems. Both of these concepts form the basis of key assumptions made by the QSR process, as an important component of QSR is the idea that strengths-based feedback can inform practice at the case manager and supervisor level as well as at the policy and program administration levels. The literature on this topic primarily provides a rationale for approaching public child welfare as a complex system, the organizational change models that speak to learning and adaptation in complex systems, as well as research studies of various training models that apply principles reflected in practice learning in complex systems. Interest here focuses on the manner in which

feedback is given to the individuals hearing it – the strengths-based piece – and the quality and relevance of the information provided.

Part One: Strategies for Evaluating Public Child Welfare Systems

A nationally administered quantitative child welfare system evaluation is the Child and Family Service Reviews (CFSR). For this review, the Children’s Bureau uses administrative data from states’ State Administered Child Welfare Information Systems (SACWIS) and the centrally-managed Adoption and Foster Care Analysis Reporting System (AFCARS) to evaluate agency performance against the Child Welfare Outcomes (Fact Sheet: History of the CFSRS, 2013)¹. Federal financial support is contingent upon states’ success or progress toward meeting those outcomes (Child Welfare Final Rule Executive Summary, 2000). Performance measures and targets, designed to represent outcomes of Safety, Permanency, and Well-being, are selected during each round of review to assess state compliance with established benchmarks. Because data that informs the outcomes are captured in a state’s SACWIS or other state data system and

¹ Two major foster care data systems were developed during the 1990s and early 2000s as government and nonprofit human service fields experienced a neoliberal ideological shift of interest in measurement for accountability: the Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS) as well as the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) and the related National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) (Shackelford et al., 2007; Stukes-Chipungu & Bent-Goodley, 2004). Federal funds were made available to states to develop SACWIS systems, also monitored by the Department of Health and Human Services, in order to automate their child welfare reporting systems, make data collection more consistent within state systems, and improve service provision (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families Division of State Systems, 1995). These systems produce point-in-time data useful for generating “snapshots” of a state system’s countable performance indicators and facilitate comparisons of system performance against established targets and over time. Certain case-specific data from state information reporting systems is collected in the AFCARS and NCANDS system, which was designed to facilitate analysis, policy development, and program management at state and federal levels (National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect, 2013). These systems capture variables about child and caregiver demographics, as well as information about the type of maltreatment, special needs, time in custody and placement information of children placed in state custody or who were designated as victims of maltreatment (National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect, 2013).

AFCARS, a fairly consistent array of indicators is available within the information system used in daily practice. Agencies themselves can monitor and evaluate some elements of case practice by observing changes in these event-based data over time (Amodeo, Bratiotis, & Collins, 2009; Goldhaber-Fiebert, Snowden, Wulczyn, Landsverk, & Horwitz, 2011; Wells & Johnson, 2001).

In the CFSR process, these performance measures are used to compare states' performance against federal benchmarks and their own prior performance but not to compare states directly; the stated rationale for the process is to help states make improvements to practice and service delivery rather than to "rank" states (Samples, Carnochan, & Austin, 2013; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families, 2014; Wells & Johnson, 2001). Reasons for this are pragmatic in relation to the way data is collected and systemic differences between states. States have different laws regarding definitions of child abuse and neglect, determining the date of reunification, and the circumstances in which kinship care will be pursued (Akin, 2011; Koh, 2010). Administrative differences exist between states also. States organize child welfare systems differently; some states organize by large regional administrative units, such as Tennessee; others are administered at the county level, such as Alabama. Private and public service agencies participate in foster care, adoption, and in providing mental health and other supportive services to children and families, and the degree of their involvement and privatization differs between states as well (Estefan, Coulter, VandeWeerd, Armstrong, & Gorski, 2012a; McBeath et al., 2014; R. Wells, Jolles, Chuang, McBeath, & Collins-Camargo, 2014). In some counties in Florida, for example, law enforcement conducts certain investigations regarding child safety that might be handled by a child protective services worker in the employment of the public child welfare agency in other counties. Policy differences at the state level can result in differences in the data used to

calculate a state's performance on outcome measures (Depanfilis, 2006; Testa, Koh, & Poertner, 2008).

Comparisons between geographic areas using AFCARS and SACWIS data can be made, and sometimes are in academic literature in conjunction with other analyses, but this must be done cautiously and with a mind to policy and demographic differences for the reasons outlined above (Koh, 2010; Summers, Wood, & Donovan, 2013; Wulczyn, Gibbons, Snowden, & Lery, 2013). The Multistate Foster Care Data Archive, maintained at the Center for State Child Welfare Data at Chapin Hall, University of Chicago, currently contains data from 22 states (Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago, n.d.). It was developed with an eye toward facilitating such comparisons as a way to identify differences in system performance that might point to particularly effective policies and strategies and for states to learn from each other (Goerge & Wulczyn, 1996).

In addition to looking at the statewide administrative data, the CFSR also includes an onsite review of a sample of cases (65 in Round 2) using a file review and interviews with key stakeholders involved in a case (Needell, 2010). In Rounds 1 and 2, these interviews were used to inform questions about practice activities and efforts, aiming to collect information about whether certain key case activities occurred. In Round 3, which began in 2015, states may use their own case review process if the state's process meets certain standards. This change was made in part due to feedback from states to the Administration for Children and Families that their qualitative case review processes were more in-depth and captured more salient data about practice than the CFSR interviews did, so an additional interview process would be cumbersome. To the best of my knowledge these decisions were made in part based on discussions among state quality assurance staff in workgroups sponsored by Annie E. Casey Foundation and the

Center for the Study of Social Policy, two of which I attended in 2010 and 2011. Another key difference between the CFSR and QSR processes is that in CFSR, feedback is given at a group level and QSRs deliver feedback at an individual case as well as group level. The first two rounds of CFSR data relied on retrospective data to measure states against national standards, a technique that provided a snapshot at a point in time of state performance but obscured the actual experiences children were having while in custody (Testa et al., 2008).

A significant challenge identified in Rounds 1 and 2 of CFSR was that its sampling process, which used retrospective data, offered little guidance for directing policy and practice change efforts looking forward - a key objective of federal evaluation (Zeller & Gamble, 2007). In addition to allowing state QSR processes to dovetail with the CFSR process, the third round of CFSRs also changed sampling processes to better produce data that reflects changing practice over time. In the third round, tracking data will rely on entry cohorts, that is, children who enter custody in the same year rather than retrospective exit cohorts. A software program developed by Hornby-Zeller Associates that can create entry cohorts out of the AFCARS data has been used to assess the quality of AFCARS data; this analysis recommended that entry cohort data would be a more appropriate way to analyze performance measures (Testa et al., 2008). Analyses of state practice has also been facilitated by the Multistate Foster Care data Archive, which also allows analysis of longitudinal data (Barth, Wildfire, & Green, 2006; Courtney, Dworsky, Piliavin, & Zinn, 1999; Koh & Testa, 2007; Wulczyn et al., 2013; Wulczyn, Orlebeke, & Melamid, 2000).

Incorporation of family-centered practice in evaluation strategies. Just as the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) in concert with federal, state, and local child welfare professionals develop the Child Welfare Outcomes for federal monitoring of state child

welfare agencies, ACF endorses a set of principles that are framed as family-centered child welfare practice. The core values of child welfare family-centered practice are outlined by ACF: “The best place for children to grow up is in families. Providing services that engage, involve, strengthen, and support families is the most effective approach to ensuring children’s safety, permanency and well-being.” (Child Welfare Information Gateway, n.d.). ACF describes “key elements” that can be applied across systems involved in providing services to families, including state child welfare systems (Child Welfare Information Gateway, n.d.). These elements are described as:

Working with the family unit to ensure the safety and well-being of all family members; strengthening the capacity of families to function effectively; engaging, empowering, and partnering with families throughout the decision- and goal-making processes; providing individualized, culturally responsive, flexible, and relevant services for each family; linking families with comprehensive, culturally relevant, community-based networks of supports and services (Child Welfare Information Gateway, n.d.).

These elements encompass a broad array of system behaviors and goals, but the underlying value inherent in each of these inform child welfare systems that in order to ensure children are safe, have permanency with their caregivers and experience well-being, interventions must incorporate the family and community. Child welfare system evaluation has always been complex, and the move toward family centered child welfare practice has created opportunities for evaluation methods to adapt, also. Research into specific applications of family-centered child welfare practice is emerging and researchers are utilizing multiple methods to explore questions about frontline practice and administrative issues (Alpert & Britner, 2009; Anderson-Butcher, Lawson, & Barkdull, 2002; Léveillé & Chamberland, 2010; Loman & Siegel, 2012).

While aggregated, point-in-time variables are used to measure child welfare system performance at the macro level, child welfare practice models endorse individualized services to

meet unique needs of families (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2002; Craft-Rosenberg, Kelley, & Schnoll, 2006). Social work values such as respect, empathy, and trust are seen as crucial to providing casework at a best-practice level. Capturing data that fully describes these qualities of best-practice casework is a challenge, as is aggregating it for use in agency improvement activities. An additional challenge agencies face is in integrating practice improvement strategies with agency evaluation strategies. Although aggregate data should reflect best practice implementation, it is not possible to look at aggregate data and identify specific best practice strategies as applied in each unique case that contributed to practice improvement. Again, this leads us back to the key issue behind this focus of research. An important question for all child welfare practitioners to consider is this – if evaluation activities cannot inform case-level practice, how does child welfare evaluation help improve practice?

Research into child welfare system evaluation. Research into child welfare practice and system evaluation essentially falls into three categories. In one, the focus is on front-line practice, assessing the effectiveness of interventions that might be presented to families involved in the child welfare system. A second category of researchers use methods designed to inform system evaluation, often borrowing from other human services fields, including education, mental health, and public health. This group of research assists the field by improving the knowledge of and tools for answering important questions about how child welfare systems are performing at an aggregate level. The third group likewise looks to the administrative level of a system as the locus of change efforts, but uses information about individual cases provided by families and caseworkers themselves in order to understand major themes that both support or inhibit the implementation of best practice.

Front-line service delivery and family-centered practice. Research into front-line service delivery is very useful for illuminating characteristics of successful frontline practice. Many studies in this category also serve to strengthen the rationale for adoptive family-centered practice. This research can point to strategies for improving front-line practice across the field, but it does not comprehensively assess performance of a child welfare system. A large body of research, using qualitative and quantitative methods, focuses on the effectiveness of individual components of family-centered practice, including assessment and intervention strategies (Gillingham, 2011; Dumbrill, 2005; Smithgall et al., 2009). Recent research in this area has incorporated parents' perspectives and experiences of child welfare system involvement. Alpert and Britner (2009), Estefan et al. (2012), Kemp, Marcenko, Hoagwood, and Vesneski (2009), and Lietz (2010) explored engagement and planning processes from the parent perspective. In a validation study of an instrument designed to capture practice model fidelity in family group decision-making, Rauktis, Bishop-Fitzpatrick, Jung, and Pennell (2013) concluded that assessment of multiple perspectives about practice is necessary to good understanding. A systematic review of measures of family feedback in child welfare noted the scarcity of validated instruments designed to capture these elements of practice (Ayala-Nunes, Jiménez, Hidalgo, & Jesus, 2014). Halvorsen (2009) conducted a small qualitative study of youth who had recently aged out of care. Each of these studies, though using various methods and applying different study aims, endorsed relationship building with youth and families and their engagement in assessment and planning processes. These are key concepts underlying family-centered child welfare practice. This research informs practice improvement strategies implemented by front line workers, but also speaks to the importance of understanding these important practice elements in evaluating child welfare system performance.

Although researchers have looked at elements of practice individually, only recently has family-centered child welfare practice begun to emerge in the literature as a holistic focus of study (Léveillé & Chamberland, 2010). In an early study of Child and Family Service Reviews Mischen (2008), looking at the experience of ten states, found that family-centered child welfare practice might be implemented more effectively through better use of family-centered tools, like child and family team meetings and assessment tools that incorporate family indicators. Michalopoulos, Ahn, Shaw, & O'Connor (2012) found that the involuntary nature of child welfare involvement creates challenges for workers and families in implementing family-centered child welfare practice – and this front-line experience can inform system administration efforts to mitigate those challenges. Lietz (2011) notes the lack of studies on theoretical adherence to family-centered child welfare practice by workers in her secondary data analysis of parents' perceptions. Smith and Mogro-Wilson (2007) described influences on inter-agency collaboration, which is encouraged as a “best practice” in some family-centered child welfare systems, among caseworkers and administrators (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013).

The move toward family-centered child welfare practice has created new opportunities and new challenges in child welfare system evaluation. A great deal of research is being conducted in how well elements of family-centered practice “play out” in child welfare systems. As child welfare systems continue to work towards providing family-centered services, research around developing effective tools to measure performance at the individual case level and at system levels is vital for ongoing practice model implementation. Research is just beginning to describe the ways that child welfare systems adopt and implement this practice model, and to what degree administrative structures and policies within the child welfare system support or hinder best practices among caseworkers and supervisors.

System evaluation and statistical methods. Researchers apply multiple evaluation strategies to child welfare in order to better understand child welfare system outcomes, often borrowing techniques from other fields in order to do so. These researchers are not attempting to directly address front-line practice delivery or change the way information is collected in the field; rather, they are exploring ways of more effectively processing data already collected to describe child welfare system characteristics and performance. Glisson, Green, and Williams (2012), for example, apply organizational theories and models of assessment from mental health into child welfare settings; Wulczyn et al. (2013) borrow Poisson event count models from biostatistics and criminal justice to compare rates of foster care placement between white and black children at the county level, highlighting the importance of community context in understanding disproportionality. Work done by Shaw, Putnam-Hornstein, Magruder, and Needell (2008), and Chapin Hall's Wulczyn, Lery and Haight, (2006) and Wulczyn and Lery (2007) uses weighted risk ratios to assess disparities, a process used previously in assessing education outcomes; Rolock (2011) builds on these and applies weighted risk ratios to assess racial disparities for children in foster care. Raghavan (2009) applies risk adjustment approaches taken from health and hospital assessment to child welfare agencies.

Within this category, researchers are also exploring the use and development of statistical methods that expand the array of potential analyses of the kind of information child welfare systems collect. Goerge and Wulczyn (1996), Fowler, Taylor, and Rufa (2011), and Courtney and Prophet (2011) apply an expanding array of statistical methods to the large datasets available in child welfare system. This body of work informs administrative-level efforts aimed at capturing useful variables, improving data quality, and developing useful aggregate measures to assess performance of child welfare systems and guide policy.

This body of work can also be applied as a program evaluation. For example, differential response is a model of child protective services in which low risk cases are referred for services without going through a formal investigative process (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013). Understanding how this policy impacts safety and service provision is crucial to policymakers and practitioners as they determine whether or how to expand this model. In exploring differential response and subsequent decision outcomes in Child Protective Services cases, Janczewski (2015), using NCANDS data, applied path analysis to reveal nuances in the effect of differential response on cases with previous child welfare system involvement. Loman and Siegel (2012) explored the provision of anti-poverty services in differential response cases, and using Cox proportional hazards survival analysis showed that families receiving anti-poverty services had a longer time until a subsequent report, if any, was made in comparison to a group that did not receive those services. Both of these studies enhance understanding from a practice and policy perspective.

This category of research also includes work done by people exploring the relationships between geographical areas and different factors at the community, county, and state levels. Nested models are able to illuminate relationships likely to be obscured or misrepresented in larger, state-level aggregations. For instance, in various studies of race, poverty, and child welfare system involvement or risk thereof, multilevel models revealed relationships at the local levels that data aggregated on a large scale does not illuminate (Coulton, Korbin, & Su, 1999; Jonson-Reid, Drake, & Zhou, 2013; Rolock, Jantz, & Abner, 2015). By finding regional effects in a study that found evidence of different decision thresholds when race and risk assessment scores were compared, Rivaux and colleagues (2008) added to this more specific understanding of local context and implications for practice and policy development. Exploring child and

placement characteristics to learn which were predictive of exits to permanency, Akin (2011) noted that competing risks analysis allowed for the identification of risk and protective factors specific within different types of permanency outcomes while also pointing out that state-specific analyses can “identify permanency patterns unique to a given locale,” (p. 1009) informing policymakers and providers more explicitly about strengths and challenges present at community levels.

Several researchers have applied economic analyses to child welfare systems, and these cost-benefit analyses tend to address issues related to comparing one evidence-based program versus another rather than assessing systemic consequences for certain decisions; for instance, which path to permanency is best for this child (Goldhaber-Fiebert et al., 2011). Despite the individualized approach of the family-centered practice model, these authors argue that data and modeling methods are available now that could allow for cost-benefit analyses to become increasingly relevant to child welfare. These strategies could develop in their importance as the results of performance-based contracting and the linking of financial incentives to child welfare outcomes become more available (Wells et al., 2014). The most direct link between economic analyses and practice at this time is made in the realm of training, as economic models are helpful in showing that preventing turnover and identifying effective training programs benefits child welfare systems, their staff, and by theoretical extension, the children and families they serve (Collins-Camargo, Sullivan, Washeck, Adams, & Sundet, 2009; Nguyen, 2012).

Economic methods can be particularly relevant to understanding trends in and relationships between poverty and child maltreatment. In the economic literature, a macro-oriented evaluation of state-level variables found that increased child welfare expenditures was associated with reduced child maltreatment (Malcolm, 2012). On the other hand, other analyses

of state-level economic indicators, family-level economic information and child maltreatment give mixed results, indicating complexity in yet another facet of child welfare (Brooks-Gunn, Schneider, & Waldfogel, 2013; Millett, Lanier, & Drake, 2011; Paxson & Waldfogel, 2003; Waldfogel, 2004).

In organizational research, both technical and philosophical discussion of how to best measure complex systems and the phenomena within them is ongoing (Kozlowski, Chao, Grand, Braun, & Kuljanin, 2013). The aggregate data used as performance indicators that is so valuable in understanding changes in system performance at the macro level is difficult, if not impossible, to apply when addressing unique family challenges in frontline practice. In a survey of frontline workers about how performance indicators related to permanency influenced their practice, Collins-Camargo, Sullivan, and Murphy (2011) noted that few frontline workers reported having access to data and even fewer reported that these indicators were useful in helping them assess practice. The challenges of measurement in a political and governmental environment that values both federal accountability and local control are many. Carnochan and colleagues (2013) discuss the tension that emerges when accountability and local flexibility become competing values in the context of measurement. In the first two rounds of the CFSRs, no states achieved substantial conformity on at least six of the seven Child Welfare Outcomes, despite the majority of states being in compliance with infrastructure-related systemic factors (JBS International, 2011; Testa et al., 2008). This once again raises the question about whether or not case level performance is being adequately informed by administrative-oriented data.

Qualitative system evaluation. A third group of research draws from both frontline service delivery and methodological research. This research area is informed by front line practice evaluation, but seeks to inform child welfare system functions. Like the second group,

the third group focuses on the administrative level of a system as the locus of change efforts, but seeks to inform that change by looking at information provided by front-line workers and supervisors as well as families and youth. Gaining understanding of how family-centered child welfare practice is being implemented, and then how effective it is as a foundation for child welfare practice, requires a different emphasis from evidence-based practice program evaluation designs (Estefan et al., 2012a; Halvorsen, 2009; Léveillé & Chamberland, 2010). The CFSR is an example of one such review process (Fact Sheet: History of the CFSRS, 2013). The Qualitative Service Review (or Quality Case Review, in some states) is another (Noonan, 2012). Both of these tools provide measures of the child welfare system performance that are based largely on feedback provided by workers and families about their unique experience, using interviews with multiple case participants and stakeholders.

There is little in the academic literature about qualitative case reviews, although there has been some study and policy recommendations made through a collaboration done by The Annie E. Casey Foundation, The Center for the Study of Social Policy, and multiple state child welfare system staff and national child welfare experts (The Annie E. Casey Foundation & Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2011). The Quality Service Review (QSR) process, based upon work conducted by Ivor Groves, PhD, and Ray Foster, PhD, of Human Systems and Outcomes, Inc., provides information to agencies about the effectiveness of their service system in meeting key practice model objectives: engagement, quality of the holistic family assessment and its utility in planning, and tracking and adjustment, among others. The review is based on the premise that there is not one specific behavior that directly produces any of these outcomes, so a broad look at family, service provider, caseworker, and other stakeholder perceptions is used to evaluate case practice (The Annie E. Casey Foundation & Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2011). In

order to hear these perceptions QSR reviewers interview multiple case participants and stakeholders. Feedback about practice is given to direct practice staff as well as agency administrators. Reviewers provide individual case feedback to workers and supervisors. These conversations are intended to model strengths-based feedback, encourage reflective practice, and ensure that reviewers understand the workers' experience of the context and facts of the case prior to offering system-level feedback. The QSR process also helps identify systemic barriers to implementing best practice, such as a mismatch between service array and local needs, funding issues, and even policies that restrict individualization of practice. If the process is successful, child welfare staff throughout the agency should be able to take feedback from a review and apply it to their work in other cases. Because the QSR applies a supportive feedback process at the case manager and supervisor level as well as at the organizational level, it has the potential to function not simply as an assessment tool but also as a method for transferring principle-based practice knowledge (The Annie E. Casey Foundation & Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2011).

The qualitative interviewing process in these reviews is time-intensive and resource-intensive, and requires a different type of time and personnel investment than analysis of secondary data. Qualitative data analysis is often challenging and not easily done quickly, and communicating review findings is very important to understanding the complexity and variety of themes that can emerge in a review of child welfare casework and system functioning. Despite these challenges, a number of states have adopted a QSR process as part of their own quality assurance, including Florida, Wisconsin, Utah, Hawaii, Tennessee, Indiana, Michigan, Virginia, New Jersey, and Alabama, among others. The decision to adopt a QSR process was encouraged through class-action litigation in a number of states (The Annie E. Casey Foundation & Center

for the Study of Social Policy, 2011). Affordability is an issue with many new initiatives in child welfare agencies, and QSR is no different (The Annie E. Casey Foundation & Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2011). Strained agency budgets underscore the importance of maximizing the utility of any evaluation process. Acting upon feedback from states that employ a QSR process and child welfare experts who endorse the QSR process of review, starting in the third round of CFSRs the Children's Bureau is approving the use of states' own QSR review processes in place of the CFSR on-site case reviews (Children's Bureau, 2015).

Part Two: Organizations and Complex Systems

Theories that fully address the multiple layers of child welfare systems and the variety of changes that occur within these layers have yet to be developed. A theory specific to child welfare systems would have to address frontline practice challenges, the conditions that influence the quality of teaming with families and other stakeholders, the development of policy and implementation strategies, and the translation of these into system goals writ large. Theories to address accountability systems and performance measurement must account for intended and unintended consequences, yet the complicated nature of cause-and-effect in complex child welfare systems has proven to be a major challenge in applying theory to the development of evaluation and reform strategies (Cohen, 2005; Solomon, 2002). Theories describing the nature of organizations have drawn heavily from the natural sciences, and many of the theories behind organizational assessment and organizational evaluation research in child welfare are taken from business and evaluation literature. Within this literature, there is a shift in process-focused evaluations to interpretation-focused evaluation in organizational settings, as organizational systems are increasingly understood to be complex and adaptive.

When Bertalanffy described the biological world in terms of relations between entities, the social work profession – and others - quickly saw the potential for the concept of open systems, rooted in natural science, to explain individual and social phenomena (Marx & Wells, 2013). By exchanging the term “organization” for “organism,” the importance of relationships, context, feedback, and personality developed into systems theory (Bertalanffy, 1972). The idea of complex systems also derives from observations of the natural world, but from very early on was also applied to social systems as well (Styhre, 2002; Tsoukas & Hatch, 2001). Five qualities that describe a complex system, whether biological or social, include: non-linear causes and effects; results derive from the scale of measurement rather than the existence of a finite answer; repetition of patterns in multiple levels of the organization; unpredictability; and having multiple feedback mechanisms (Tsoukas & Hatch, 2001). Complex systems are often described as surviving on the “edge of chaos,” that is, necessarily self-organizing, or adjusting as needed to preserve or enhance the system (Burnes, 2005; Morrison, 2012). Complex systems that do not self-organize stop functioning either from stagnation or chaos (Burnes, 2005). In these systems, one can only make what Tsoukas and Hatch (2001) call “imperfect generalizations,” that is, actions are contextual and so a perfectly predictable outcome of any action requires perfect knowledge, and perfect knowledge is not attainable in a complex system. The implication for evaluation and organizational change through the lens of complex theory is that linear causes-and-effects are not easily predicted, but complexity theory does offer some guidance in framing ways of understanding an organization’s feedback processes, self-organizing rules, and the qualities within the organization itself that facilitate change (Burnes, 2004; Rosch, 2002; Styhre, 2002).

Organizational performance evaluation based on an assumption that organizations are rational and goals are specific is not adequate for these complexities, yet performance measurement remains important in an accountability-focused environment (Busch & Hostetter, 2009; Martz, 2013; Morrison, 2012). An additional component of performance measurement in public child welfare is the emphasis on continuous improvement. Unlike many other performance evaluation goals, the Child Welfare Outcomes are couched as comparative goals rather than finite benchmarks. For example, Child Welfare Outcome number one is “reduce the recurrence of child abuse and/or neglect” not “reduce the recurrence of child abuse and/or neglect by 10% within two fiscal years” or even “eliminate the recurrence of child abuse and/or neglect.” While the preferred incidence of child abuse and neglect – zero – is unreasonable to expect, even systems that function comparatively well on this measure are expected to continuously work to improve. In recognition of these complexities, methodologies developed that addressed questions about assessment of complex organization. Action research, as Lewin (1997) saw it, provided a means to explore questions about highly contextual changes at a group level. It requires active participation from researchers and those who are the focus of evaluation, yet also requires some means of assessing movement toward a goal from some vantage point outside the system (Lewin, 1997). This leads to a “spiral of steps” (Lewin, 1997), in which research leads to a change in behavior, which in turn becomes a subject of research or evaluation (Burnes, 2004). This reflexivity means that practitioners themselves, as well as evaluators, within an organization provide some of the context in which organizations self-organize, or change (Tsoukas & Hatch, 2001).

Levinson (2002, p. 324) decisively noted, “all organizational assessment is necessarily subjective,” in that action research models and evaluations that involve reflection upon the

process itself are integral to complex organizational evaluation. This idea is also echoed in continuous learning models and the concept of practice improvement as a continuous process. These theories connect the principles of reflexivity, adopting a problem-solving focus, and encouraging lateral feedback processes to increasing knowledge about ways to improve practice and system strategies (Burnes, 2004; Goerge & Wulczyn, 1996; Kerman et al., 2012).

Quantitative review strategies can encourage reflexivity and the adoption of a problem-solving focus when practitioners themselves participate in data analysis and planning processes, such as learning labs used in Mississippi (Murphy & Goodson, 2007; Shackelford, Harper, Sullivan, & Edwards, 2007). Qualitative review processes, such as QSR, uses interviews and individual case feedback to incorporate direct practitioners' experience into the analysis and to provide a forum for that experience to be used in continuous learning and development about practice. Research into learning models and the theories behind "learning organizations" are described below.

Organizational change and learning organizations. In complex child welfare systems, the perfect relationship between cause and effect is often elusive. There are many variables to consider, and these systems have little control over the environment in which they work. In addition, it is often very difficult to create the counterfactual circumstances necessary for research using an experimental design (Drury, 2014; Anderson, 2009). A highly influential theory about organizational change is Lewin's three-stage model, developed in the late 1940s and early 1950s in studies of group dynamics and improving social relationships between groups (Lewin, 1997; Burnes, 2004, Burnes, 2005). In this model, organizational change is imagined as a three-step process in which the organization first "unfreezes" from a steady state, then undergoes the change, and then "re-freezes" into a steady state with the change now embedded in the organization (Lewin, 1997). Lewin's three stage model of planned change guided

organizational change theory for decades by those who embraced his model and built upon it, such as Kotter (1996), and Lippett, Watson, and Westley (as cited in Mitchell, 2013). It also influenced the development of change models by those who critiqued it as too simplistic and inadequate for fully describing the influences in an organization (Burnes, 2004; Styhre, 2002). As complexity theories are concerned with the emergence of order, Styhre (2002) notes that complexity theories can provide a framework to account for an organization's self-organizing rules, and the ways these may be understood to produce desired change. However, as these commentators note there are some common themes about organizational change between Lewin's theory and complexity theories, the most significant being that understanding both the context in which change is occurring and the feedback informing it are important to producing change (Burnes, 2004; Mitchell, 2013).

Alongside these theoretical developments, in the complex, challenging circumstances of child welfare services, the increased attention to accountability and performance measurement has increased the attention given to evaluation methods. Returning to the question of how child welfare evaluation can help improve practice, there are several theories that focus on learning and knowledge transfer as a means to facilitate positive change at organizational and individual service levels. Many of these theories endorse strategies consistent with principles of family-centered practice and use of quantitative and qualitative data.

A lateral focus on learning, incorporating stakeholders' and peers' experiences and perspectives, contrasts with the hierarchal form of administration in child welfare organizations. Mildon and Shlonsky (2011) note that this administrative structure can inhibit active and collaborative learning. Administrative structures and even structured decision-making tools used in high-stakes child welfare decisions can appease concerns about decision-making capabilities

of frontline workers, while on the other hand these very tools may discourage the analytical and intuitive reasoning that promotes learning (Collins, 2008; Gillingham, 2011). In a case study of a large organization, the desire on the part of members to decrease anxiety in the face of changes resulted in self-organization toward a hierarchal decision-making structure even though the agency heads endorsed a lateral decision-making structure (Houchin & MacLean, 2005). Collins (2008) further notes that as agencies become more data-driven as a result of accountability culture, many agencies are trying to steer this quality into a culture of “learning.” A carefully structured and organizationally-supported evaluation process is one element of an organization that can ensure these structures enhance, rather than hamper, learning and improve service delivery (Agbényiga, 2011; Munro & Hubbard, 2011; Munro, 2004).

The Program Improvement Plan (PIP), a required plan state child welfare systems and the federal government develop in partnership to improve state performance in areas not in substantial compliance with CFSR outcomes, is used to plan improvement strategies for areas needing improvement (Carnochan et al., 2013). Studying PIPs from round one of the CFSR, Mischen (2008) applied knowledge management theories that developed from information technology (IT) fields to understand how states managed the information collected through these performance improvement processes. In this study, Mischen (2008) found that case review processes, increased use of assessment tools, and family team meetings were strategies included in the PIPs that functioned as means to manage the copious amount of information gathered about a case and thus increasing knowledge. Despite the apparent contradiction that standardized tools can facilitate the individualization of services, Mischen (2008) notes that these tools can support family-centered practice by focusing the organization’s information functions on goal-directed activities.

As learning occurs at all levels of an organization, so does training transfer – an important idea that differentiates the learning that occurs in a training process to the application of new knowledge and skills in the field (Curry, McCarragher, & Dellmann-Jenkins, 2005). Studies exploring training transfer have identified the importance of organizational factors to training transfer. (Kontoghiorghes, 2014) notes that training transfer occurs in part as the result of organizational factors, including organizational climate, before, during, and after training occurs; these organizational climate factors include supervisory support and continuous learning climate, among others. Continuous learning environment, supervisory support, and reflection upon learning within a collective and supportive organizational climate assists in training transfer (Burnes, 2004; Liu & Smith, 2011). Supervisory and organizational supports were also identified as key factors in training transfer (Antle, Barbee, & van Zyl, 2008), and these factors together with successful training transfer were found previously to be predictive of staff retention, itself an important factor in considering organizational functioning (Cooksey-Campbell, Folaron, & Sullenberger, 2013; Curry et al., 2005).

Linking many of these factors to motivation for learning and performance, Preston (2013) found that outcome-focused, worker-specific data is motivating when given in a way that helps workers achieve desired outcomes or improve their own performance. The idea of “evaluation capacity building,” in which evaluation teams incorporate coaches to increase motivation as well as knowledge and skills in frontline practitioners, comes from the evaluation profession and is not meant specifically for human serving fields (Ensminger et al., 2015). However, in organizations that are supportive of developing a learning culture, coaching models that are supportive, goal-driven, and use teachable moments can increase motivation (Ensminger et al., 2015). Characteristics of coaches in this model align well with best practices in child welfare

supervision and can be applied to qualitative case review processes (Salus, 2004). The information-gathering, analysis, and feedback elements of qualitative case review processes could provide opportunities to embed these factors that support learning and transfer through an evaluative process. Indeed, change management strategies invoking assessment, planning, implementation, and evaluation at the organizational level echo practice models at the frontline level; practitioners apply these change management strategies for family systems in the course of frontline work (Mitchell, 2013).

Frontline and supervisory staff have critical roles in implementing child welfare system change, but actors in all parts of the organization play a role in organizational change. Agency leadership has a particular role in facilitating organizational change by utilizing information provided by all areas of the organization, communicating the rationale for the change process, and being transparent about the change process – in theory, all of which increase organizational functioning by increasing trust in the organization (Devine, 2010). Likewise, frontline staff influence organizational culture. When this culture comprises shared norms and values around service delivery, support between frontline and administrative workers, and participation in goal-setting and decision-making by frontline workers, service delivery is positively impacted (Agbényiga, 2011). Complexity theory offers up the idea that reflexivity between frontline practitioners and supervisory and management staff is important to self-organization and producing change. In this view, it is desirable for organizations to give workers freedom to work towards meeting principle-based, rather than performance target-based, work; a continuous learning environment and an orientation toward practice principles are important to producing change in organizations that operate “on the edge of chaos” (Burnes, 2004; Styhre, 2002). Houchin and MacLean (2005) noted that the desire to decrease anxiety is also a driver of self-

organization, suggesting that psychological and behavioral theories about change are also important to understanding organizational change. Frontline staff face legendary job requirements, tasks, caseloads, and complex decisions; stress can be a barrier to buy in to change initiatives (McCrae, Scannapieco, Leake, Potter, & Menefee, 2014). Duit and Galaz (2008) comment that governance theory, which speaks to a bureaucratic model of top-down decision making and implementation, must be applied differently in the complex adaptive systems of child welfare. Rather than base organizational change processes on assumptions that linear cause and effect rules apply in these complex adaptive systems, agencies will be more successful if they focus on developing adaptability and problem-solving characteristics within the agency (Burnes, 2004; Duit & Galaz, 2008).

Training and learning models. The word “training” evokes images of classrooms and lecture-style learning, often noted by child welfare workers with a critical eye (Collins, 2008; Luongo, 2007). “On-the-job training,” a mainstay of new staff training in child welfare, is designed to offer new staff the opportunity to practice necessary skills while under very close supervision of an experienced worker. There is an assumption that there are specific tasks to complete and clear behavioral objectives in practice (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2002). However, a family-centered practice environment is built upon principles rather than tasks (Craft-Rosenberg et al., 2006). This creates a challenge in transferring knowledge, as the principles behind practice decisions and the skills and behaviors necessary to implement practice must be integrated (Atukpawu, Mertinko, Graham, & Denniston, 2012; Curry et al., 2005; Kontoghiorghes, 2014).

Supportive supervision and collaborative learning models have been demonstrated in a number of studies exploring how these models fit in family-centered practice settings (Austin,

Dal Santo, & Lee, 2012; McCrae et al., 2014; Michalopoulos et al., 2012). The importance of the supervisor in frontline workers' assessment of their own practice skills was more critical than data measures in one study (Collins-Camargo, Shackelford, Kelly, & Martin-Galijatovic, 2011). The organizational influence on knowledge transfer and perceived support has long been established in both the organizational effectiveness literature and in literature that speaks to adult learning more broadly (Antle et al., 2008; Collins-Camargo et al., 2009; Kontoghiorghes, 2014; Liu & Smith, 2011). Learning lab models that incorporate the perspectives and knowledge held by multiple stakeholders, use data about carefully defined measures, and provide a forum for reflection and critical thinking among stakeholders, have been applied in child welfare and other human service systems. Several authors have noted that these characteristics are important for solving complex system problems (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2002; Bosch, Nguyen, Maeno, & Yasui, 2013; Shackelford et al., 2007). Design teams, which are employed when members' experience and expertise is desired in the development of child welfare practice policy and initiatives (including qualitative case review protocols), apply characteristics of action research and family-centered practice models in their work as "learning groups" (The Annie E. Casey Foundation & Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2011). In design teams, stakeholders with multiple relationships to the agency or within the agency are included, and the relationship between these "learning group" members is important in the dialogue that occurs between the information members bring to the group and the information they are intended to take from the group (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2002). This type of learning model mirrors central tenets of family central practice models by acknowledging the positive potential of working relationships and the value of multiple perspectives in assessment, goal-setting, and planning interventions (Sudol, 2009). The learning group model draws from social learning theory, which offers a

framework for understanding how individuals learn in a group setting, and sociocultural learning theory, which offers a framework for understanding how experience, identity, and the influence of the organization itself impacts learners (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2002).

CHAPTER THREE - METHODS

As previously discussed, my understanding of child welfare practice and my interest in the research problem I explored was based in no small part on my experience working in a public child welfare agency during a time of practice reform. It developed from the initiatives that were put in place, the policies that were developed, discussions with colleagues, and the literature that resonates with and broadens the perspective gained from my experience. Child welfare practice involves applying abstract practice concepts such as engagement and family-centeredness to individual cases. The aim is to consistently apply the principles of practice to families, but that will not necessarily mean each caseworker must perform the same exact behaviors from one family to the next. It is a child welfare reality that context changes from one situation to another and so the strategies used to apply best practice principles may change from one situation or time to another. Just as caseworkers adapt to what works best for each family, child welfare agencies must also adapt to what works in their specific context of practice. Therefore, applying a research approach that can accommodate this degree of variability with methodological integrity is crucial to collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). This chapter will describe the rationale for the qualitative approach and specific method chosen, the research setting and participants, data collection, data analysis procedures, and the ethical considerations and decisions that arose prior to and during the study and how I addressed these.

Rationale for the Qualitative Approach and Method

A pragmatic qualitative approach informs this study's design. I chose a qualitative description method based on its potential to address the challenge of providing best practice to

children and families while incorporating a variety of experiences and perspectives. This method captured the experience of child welfare workers and their perspective about how qualitative case reviews relate to child welfare practice (Neergaard, Olesen, Andersen, & Sondergaard, 2009; Sandelowski, 2009). It remains my intention to bring the participants' experience forward, so the knowledge can have practical value to the people implementing qualitative review strategies in public child welfare agencies. This method also allowed me to organize the findings in a way that fulfills an important potential of exploratory qualitative research, and that is to contribute to the research literature by informing future concepts and hypotheses for future inquiry (Neergaard et al., 2009).

Qualitative description has been defined as a discrete method and it is used frequently in health research, where individual patients' perceptions of an experience are useful to practitioners seeking to modify and improve services (Milne & Oberle, 2005). For this purpose, understanding of participants' experiences from their own viewpoint is critical; highly interpretive analysis of the data is not necessary or desirable. Analysis and interpretation are focused on comprehensiveness of the description and producing information that can lead to next steps for research and practice. Milne and Oberle (2005) argue that:

Qualitative description is a stand-alone method that affords a comprehensive summary of human experience without an in-depth level of interpretation. The goal is to stay close to the surface of the data while capturing all the elements of that experience, and the inherent scientific rigor is a reflection of a researcher's ability to achieve that goal. (p. 413)

Qualitative description is not always included in the canon of qualitative methods in social sciences and has been criticized as not having the rigor and interpretive nature associated with other more commonly cited methods used to explore experiences, such as hermeneutic (as distinct from descriptive) phenomenology, grounded theory, and ethnography (Vaismoradi,

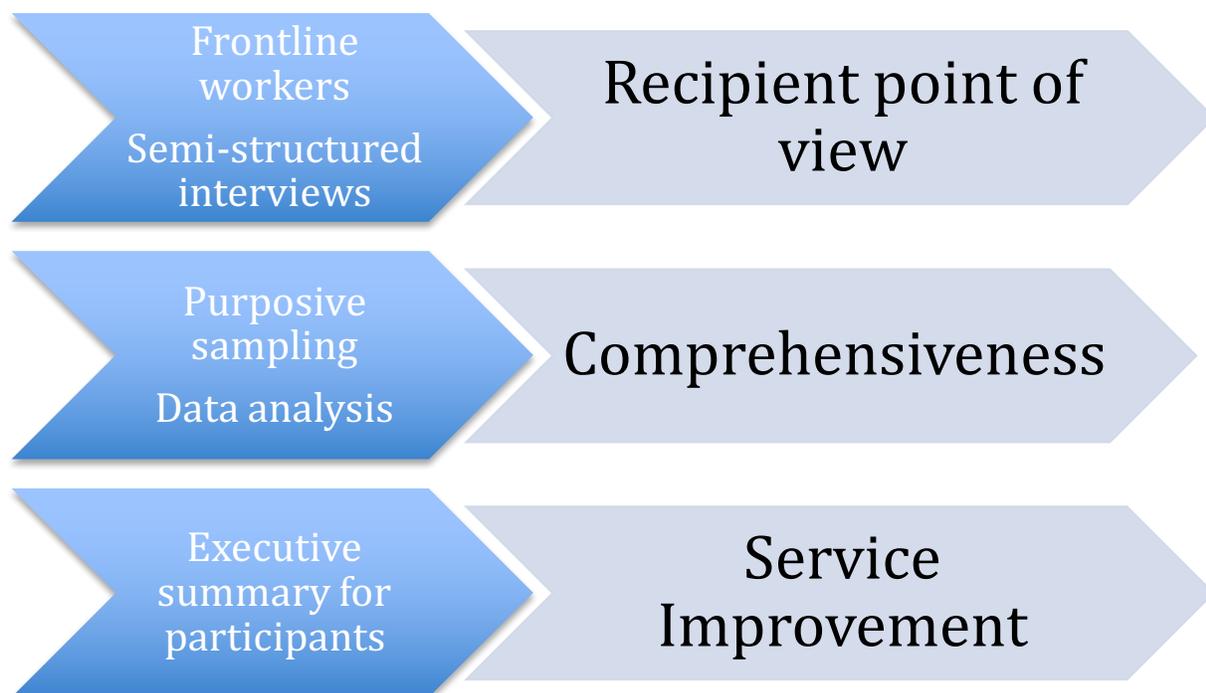
Turunen, & Bondas, 2013). Sandelowski (2009) regretfully notes that an earlier article intended to clarify the purpose of qualitative description as a method also “served to reinforce the misconception that qualitative research could encompass the mere celebration, as opposed to interpretation, of data” (p.83). At times, it is imperfectly fitted within phenomenology, but the highly interpretive nature of phenomenologic analysis provides unsatisfactory guidance of analytical rigor in pragmatic research (Kratwohl & Smith, 2005; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Qualitative description is distinct from these methods in well-defined ways and its product is distinct from the product of phenomenology, grounded theory and ethnography as well. If one considers qualitative description a unique method, there are analytical considerations that can be applied to ensure rigor in this method.

While phenomenology and qualitative description share a goal of describing an event or experience, analytical methods applied in qualitative description are not seeking to be heavily interpretive and stay as close to participants’ words and contexts described in their interviews (Neergaard et al., 2009; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). The goal of qualitative description is not to produce a theory explaining the phenomenon, and thus the sampling techniques and search for theoretical saturation differ from those in grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Neergaard et al., 2009; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013; Wu & Beaunae, 2012). Ethnography, with its emphasis on immersion into a group of people rather than a specific experience, might be a suitable method for understanding work in a child welfare office but not for answering the questions addressed in this study (Neergaard et al., 2009; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013).

Primary considerations in establishing the quality of this study are the concepts of authenticity and credibility, which relate to data collection and analysis; and criticality and integrity, which relate to study design and the related decisions made throughout the study

(Milne & Oberle, 2005; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013; Whittemore, Chase, & Mandle, 2001). All of these concepts, in particular credibility of results, relate to the rigor of the study. In this context, rigor reflects the pragmatic basis of the study and will be reflected in results that speak true to the participants' experience and provide a comprehensive description of their experience. Since a goal is to produce results with this authenticity, I gave primary attention to the participants' words. I demonstrated integrity by reflecting upon my own experience and how this guides my analysis of the data, using transcripts and analytic memos to reflect upon the interviews and ensure the description produced reflects the authentic voice of participants. Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between the study design and the goals of the qualitative description method.

Figure 1. Study Design: Criticality.



Authors within professional service fields have recently begun to show how this philosophy can guide effective practice research (Florczak, 2014; Milne & Oberle, 2005; Morgan, 2014; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). The QSR process itself is pragmatic, and so is my exploration into the ways it influences practice. The principles underlying family centered practice, which include engagement, a strengths-based approach to assessment and collaboration in planning, are embedded in the feedback processes of QSR. A systematic exploration of the perspectives of the people who have experienced this feedback process has the potential to help identify ways to enhance QSR's utility as a learning tool for agencies. The underlying problem, or rather the challenge, in using QSR is maximizing its impact on practice. This fits nicely with the pragmatic approach as well as the setting of the research. Child welfare workers have high caseloads and heavy workloads; child welfare systems operate under a set of challenging requirements, many under court reforms ranging from supportive to highly adversarial, and during a political period in which the future prospect of increased funding to government agencies is contentious at best. Given the reality of the practice environment, it is desirable for research efforts to articulate results in a way that can be used in the field to improve practice. While pragmatism typically emphasizes utility, I also take this approach from an ethical perspective. Borrowing resources from a stressed system to conduct research should only be done when there can be a return on the investment in time and effort.

Research Setting and Participants

Using a purposive sampling strategy, I selected five sites (regional/county offices) in three states for this research. States were approached to participate based upon their length of time implementing QSR and the presence of a child welfare system settlement agreement, and were selected to participate based upon their willingness and their own state IRB approval

timeline and procedures. Using multiple sites allowed for a bit of geographic diversity and variations in practice contexts. The QSR process has been used in at least ten states, although some states use it only for special reviews of specific case management types (Oklahoma and Florida)². One of the three initial states I approached declined to participate, as did the first state I selected to replace that one. One state declined because they had put their QSR process on hiatus, and the other had recently stopped using it completely. None of the research review boards within any of the five states that were approached were a barrier to me fulfilling my research timeline, although there was a three-month gap in data collection between the first two states' and the last state to grant consent to my study.

Sites within states were selected based upon ease of travel, ease of burden on the office in participating, and the site's experience with QSR – that is, not every county in every state may have experienced a QSR. These decisions were made by negotiating with the states' research review liaisons. I interviewed staff from urban offices and non-urban offices. In two states, two offices in two separate counties participated as sites. In the third state, QSR was in the early stages of implementation, and had not been to every county in the state. In that state, one county site participated.

Description of participating sites. One state began using QSR around 20 years ago, and the impetus for its adoption was a class action lawsuit over foster care practices in their state. In this state, QSR scores were tied to their exit requirements in the settlement agreement. As a result, this state uses a designation of certain scoring patterns as “case failure,” while other cases “pass.” Even though child and family well-being was clearly the major motivator for using the

² Alabama, California (Los Angeles County), Florida, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, New Jersey, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Utah, and Virginia. Washington DC also uses QSR, although the QSR they use encompasses Mental Health and Child Welfare Departments.

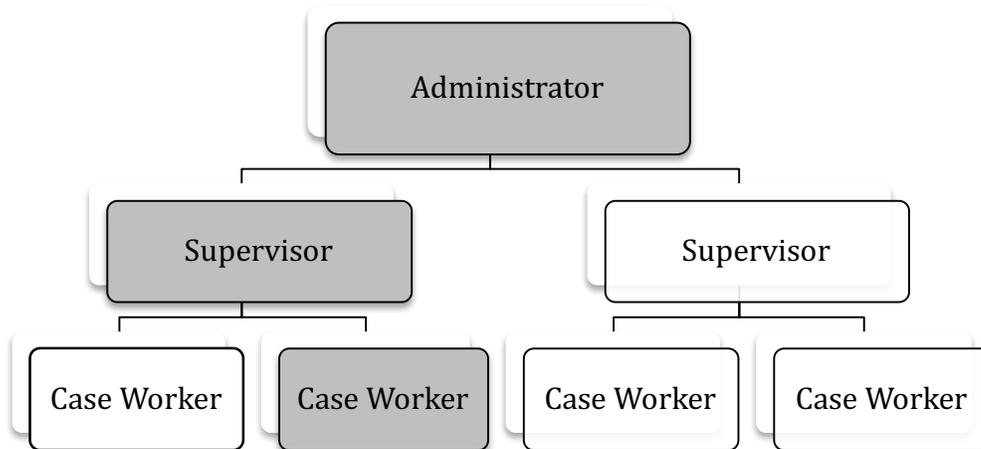
QSR results, the scores themselves were important to their view of their success in practice. As an illustration of this, one respondent from this state noted that on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being if a state used exclusively quantitative, “box-ticking” type of tools in their evaluation system, and 10 being if a state only used qualitative processes, this worker said the ideal review system for an agency should be at a 6. But the reality was that even with the state’s emphasis and attention to QSR, the review system was somewhere between a 1 and a 5. Another state was implementing practice model reform and QSR under similar court requirements, but were new to the process. In this state, participants’ excitement about family-centered practice and teamwork was palpable, yet so were feelings of being overwhelmed by the simultaneous rollout of major practice reform initiatives and a new computer-based information management system. This system is required to perform a variety of functions, any of which require the user to perform multiple steps. In this state, participants wondered if the computer system could not be more useful in preparation for the QSR review, even though it cannot explain the complexity of casework. In the third location, there was no court order and the agency had decided to implement QSR slowly, with the next review coming in three years and with support from an academic resource center.

When recruiting states into the project, I gave states the option of allowing me to offer their participants a \$20 gift card to a local discount store as a “thank you” for their time. Decisions about whether to offer the gift card were made by the state liaisons, as policies regarding participation in research during paid time can differ. Two states accepted the offer; the third explicitly allowed their workers to participate during their working hours. In this state, the gift cards were not offered.

Description of individual participants. The individual participants were also chosen purposively, using a reputational sampling method (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009) to ensure that

all the participants had participated in a QSR by having at least one of their cases reviewed. Figure 2 depicts the organizational chart followed by the offices in which I conducted interviews, and the shaded boxes show the relationship to caseworkers who had a case reviewed using a QSR. The figure reflects a typical “tree” depicting caseworkers, their supervisors, and second-level supervisors. These represent people considered to have direct responsibility for cases on the caseload. The shaded boxes indicate the people eligible to participate in the study, if they experienced a qualitative service review of a case on their caseload.

Figure 2: Eligible Participants by Job Role.



This sampling method allowed me to ask staff in the states to identify workers who met the study criteria without having to look at sensitive case-review data myself. In two states, a state central office coordinator reached out to county leadership about the project to gauge interest in participating in the project. In the third, a university-located research specialist with the child welfare resource center contacted county offices.

Once county offices were contacted and their local administrator agreed to participate, staff provided me with names and emails of case workers, supervisors, and administrators who

had had a case reviewed in a QSR. I emailed potential participants individually, so that they did not have to make their participation known to anyone else in the office. This method introduced important limitations, since using reputational sampling addressed issues related to feasibility but it also resulted in other state staff either knowing, or having a very good idea of who participated in the interviews. None of the participants expressed this as a concern during discussions of confidentiality, and in one site the three participants all knew each other were participating. In the state with the longest experience with QSR, I was especially concerned that participants might be “creamed” to some extent because their central administration is very positive about the QSR process. I do not have any way of knowing if that happened, but, I was reassured once we had our interviews that the extent of their experience encompassed a range of experiences from positive to negative. Thus, I believe that the risk to comprehensiveness in a qualitative description was mitigated by their candor. It is possible that state staff selected counties and people they knew to have experiences with QSR that were similar to theirs, and thus could potentially limit the perspectives captured in this study’s.

At every level of sampling, these procedures raised some challenges related to the integrity and trustworthiness of this research. For instance, the degree of transferability was difficult to discern for some themes, and the reputational sampling method has the potential to introduce people into the study who are like-minded about QSR with the referent (Padgett, 2008; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). However, the goal of qualitative description is to provide comprehensive description of the experiences the participants describe so that future hypothesizing and studies may be developed – it is a method that informs a wider audience about the comprehensive experience of others, not a method to capture experience of a comprehensive population or to build theory from a saturation point (Sandelowski, 2009). This sampling

procedure has been used in qualitative studies with child welfare worker participants that explored questions with implications for agency policy, and it reflects a pragmatic and ethical way to proceed with research in public agencies (Bruce, 2016; Drabble, 2010; Sandelowski, 2009). Acknowledging the limitations this sampling method introduced in this study, the participants produced meaningful insights consistent with the goals of qualitative description.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with one to four county staff in each site, for a total of fourteen interviews. Seventeen interviews were originally scheduled, but three did not occur due to unanticipated casework events. Prior qualitative research in human services fields have used twelve to twenty-one interviewees with success at identifying themes (Drabble, Jones, & Brown, 2013; Estefan, Coulter, VandeWeerd, Armstrong, & Gorski, 2012b). The only requirement for participation in interviews was prior participation in a QSR. For caseworkers and supervisors, this meant having a case from their caseload reviewed in a QSR; for administrators, this meant having a supervisor and worker from their team reviewed in a QSR and participation in QSR feedback activities at the administrative level. Table 1 describes characteristics of the states and the participants from each state by job title and their role in QSR.

Table 1: Description of Participants

State's Use of QSR	State	Participant	Job Title	Role in QSR
Recent, with litigation	A	P1	Caseworker	Reviewed once
	A	P2	Caseworker	Reviewed twice
	A	P3	Caseworker	Reviewed once
	A	P4	Caseworker	Reviewed once
Long-term, exited litigation	B	P5	Caseworker	Reviewed more than 3 times
	B	P6	Caseworker	Reviewed once
	B	P7	Caseworker	Reviewed more than 3 times
	B	P8	Caseworker	Reviewed more than 3 times, Reviewer
	B	P9	Administrator	Reviewed more than 3 times as supervisor, Reviewer
	B	P10	Supervisor	Reviewed more than 3 times as caseworker and supervisor, Reviewer
	B	P11	Supervisor	Reviewed more than 3 times as caseworker and supervisor, Reviewer
Recent, no litigation	C	P12	Caseworker	Reviewed once, Trained as reviewer
	C	P13	Administrator	Reviewed once
	C	P14	Caseworker	Reviewed once, reviewer

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were a natural fit for pragmatic research. I used semi-structured interviews, which allowed me to ask participants direct questions about perceptions of the impact the QSR has had on their work, and I was also able to follow up with topics that workers introduced into the conversation. I conducted these interviews with individual direct practice staff, including case workers, supervisors, and their supervisors. I created an interview guide for myself to ensure that I asked questions covering the topics of interest, but I did not ask them verbatim or in a specific order. My goal was to remain focused on the topics necessary to address the research questions, while making sure the interviews were participant-driven (Creswell, 2014; Padgett, 2008). By outlining the topics I intended to cover, participants had enough specificity about the topics that were my interest to make an informed decision about whether they wanted to address it during the interview. These qualities made the semi-structured interview format ideal for qualitative research with participants involved in the child welfare system, as sensitive, often painful experiences are often the topic of study (Collins, 2008; Estefan et al., 2012a). This research, while not focused on experiences with specific families, still elicited strong emotions in some participants and the flexibility allowed me to respond to those feelings without breaking script.

I conducted a pilot interview with a classmate who is a former foster care worker who had participated in a QSR in a state that was not selected as a site for this research. The pilot participant pointed out redundancies in questions that I then eliminated from the semi-structured protocol. The pilot interview also helped me better estimate the length of time the interviews were expected to take for the early participants. Although the pilot interview was conducted primarily to address logistical and structural questions about the semi-structured protocol and

interview format, it likely influenced some things I listened for in the interviews. For instance, my pilot participant spoke of the color of the folder placed in one's chair when one of your cases was selected for the QSR. I recognized a similar experience from another participant and was able to follow up with the interviewee about how it felt when one realized one of their cases would be reviewed. Additionally, the pilot interview helped me understand that speaking to participants about QSR preparation and casework processes could be redundant – knowing that these “two” processes were so connected helped me avoid repetition in the interviews and identify themes related to practice learning more effectively.

Four interviews took place face to face and ten occurred over the phone. I traveled to two sites to meet the participants in person. I offered to meet them wherever they felt comfortable; they all chose to meet at their offices. We secured conference rooms for privacy. One of the participants chose not to have her interview recorded, so I took detailed notes for this interview and recorded the others. I had arranged to travel to the second site, but the trip was interrupted by a computer problem that grounded all the flights on my airline. Interviews for the second site were conducted over the phone while I sat at the airport. These conversations were not recorded to avoid having their end of the conversation broadcast in a public location. Rather, I took detailed notes of these interviews. The remaining interviews took place over the phone. I sat in my office, with the door closed, and all of the participants interviewed in this way agreed to have these interviews recorded. For the recorded interviews, I used two devices for the purpose of having a backup. I used a digital recorder with a hard drive which I erased after uploading the interview recordings into university-provided, password protected cloud storage. I also used an app on my phone, which is password protected. No respondent stated their name on the recordings, per my request.

Because the questions focused on workers' experiences and perspectives, an open-ended first-person account was the most appropriate method to answer them. I was able to begin member-checking during these interviews because of the conversational style, and this was an important component in ensuring authenticity and integrity of data (Milne & Oberle, 2005). I was able to ask clarifying questions for follow up when I was unsure of a participant's meaning. I was also able to ask later participants about thoughts and experiences earlier participants had discussed. Questions explored in the interviews included:

- How do you describe best practice?
- How do you describe your role in implementing best practice and the activities you perform to implement best practice?
- In your view, what factors influence successful implementation of best practices and what barriers make implementing them difficult?
- What ways of learning about best practice have been the most important to you?
- How would you describe QSR? What was going through the QSR process like?

What happened during the review?

- What kinds of things did you learn? What part of the QSR process was most meaningful to you? Useful?
- How did you and your supervisor talk about the QSR after it was over? What happened after the QSR feedback?
- How did the management and administration of this office handle the QSR process?
- Did you do anything different as a practitioner after the review? What made you decide to do things differently?

- Do you believe QSR has had an impact on practice? What would you say is the most significant way QSR influences practice?
- How would you change the QSR to make it more useful in practice improvement?

Work towards gaining approval from state research review boards began immediately following the University of Alabama IRB approval, which was granted April 21, 2016. Data collection began as soon as approval from state research review boards was given. Data was collected between June, 2016 and November, 2016. Approval from the first two states came relatively quickly, but because the third and fourth state I approached declined to participate, I had a three month break in collecting data. I used this “delay” to transcribe, and I was able to transcribe all the interviews myself. This allowed me to become “immersed” in the data (Padgett, 2008). I wrote analytic memos after each interview to provide additional context to the interviews, recording thoughts I had about potential themes if something a participant said reminded me of another interview and to describe the emotional tone of the interviews (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Saldana, 2013). The written transcripts, notes, and analytic memos were the data used for coding and analysis.

Data Analysis

Because the semi-structured interview is framed around the themes that inform the research questions, in analyzing the information I was careful not to apply circular reasoning in identifying themes. It is important that the themes emerge from the answers to the questions, not the questions themselves (Michalopoulos et al., 2012; Milne & Oberle, 2005). As mentioned above, the data that were analyzed for this study included the written transcripts of the interviews, the notes I took on the interviews that were not recorded, and the analytic memos. I took notes during the recorded interviews, but primarily focused on the conversation and then

wrote analytic memos immediately after the interviews. I intended to hire a transcriptionist for some of the interviews, but I did not. One reason was that once I began transcribing the interviews, I became immersed in the data. As recommended by Padgett (2008), this process of transcription became an early step in the analytical process. Additionally, two unintentional circumstances allowed me the time to transcribe all the interviews. Four interviews were not recorded, so transcription was unnecessary. Also, because several weeks went by between interviews at the second and third site, I had the time to transcribe myself. Ultimately, I believe that being able to transcribe the interviews myself strengthened my analysis by giving me the opportunity to become immersed in the data (Padgett, 2008).

Coding. Both Saldana (2013) and Creswell (2014) describe coding as an iterative process between a researcher and their data, with multiple rounds of coding. In qualitative methods, researchers must be prepared to face decisions regarding coding and analysis throughout the process as data is collected and reviewed. For qualitative description, researchers have offered criteria for making these decisions with integrity – that is, consistent with the research question and true to the data (Milne & Oberle, 2005; Whittemore et al., 2001). During the proposal stage of this study, I included suggested methods for coding that I anticipated starting with; they were chosen based on their relevance to the research method, the kind of data being collected, and the research question being addressed. The actual analysis process remained consistent through the first round of coding, but there were some adaptations made to the initial plan as the study proceeded.

For the first round of coding, I used systematic coding methods as described by Saldana (2013), using multiple cycles of coding to first “split” the data into discrete ideas, or codes, and then categorized these codes by topic and the timing of the action described in the theme in

relation to the QSR process. This method of coding is particularly appropriate for semi-structured interviews exploring experience and perceptions of participants (Saldana, 2013). Structural coding allows for in-depth analysis of subconcepts within categories and is particularly useful for data resulting from semi-structured interviews, where the researcher-imposed questions may drive categories of answers (Crowe, Inder, & Porter, 2015; Saldana, 2013; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). This form of coding also provides a way to separate the text of the transcripts from the questions that were asked so that prominent themes may be identified across questions. I believe this was the most appropriate analytical method for exploring the primary concepts of workers' understanding of best practice, the experience of having one's case practice evaluated qualitatively, the learning that occurred during the process, and the relationship between that experience and future practice. Milne and Oberle (2005) recommend coding relatively large narrative units to preserve context with the data, but highlighting critical code passages to avoid substantial overlap at this point in the analysis.

In the first and second cycle of coding, I used *in vivo* coding methods, consistent with qualitative description methods of using the participants' words in the description. I anticipated using evaluative coding during the second cycle of coding, but I found that many of the first round themes were emerging from participants' recommendations to improve the implementation of the QSR process. Evaluation coding is a strategy that allows researchers to identify patterns in the data based on comparing a participants' description of a process with an ideal version of that process (Saldana, 2013). It seemed appropriate, then, to use evaluation coding in this initial cycle. From these first round codes, themes related to recommendations about future use of QSR emerged. These themes contributed to a substantial amount of the member-checking strategy as well, as I included these "recommendation" style themes in the

document (see Member Checking, below, and Appendix B). Fairly large excerpts of text, often four of five sentences at a time, make up the “units” of data from the first round in order to preserve the context of the theme and narrative explanation from the participants. By preserving the context within these descriptive and narrative statements, I was able to use these first round excerpts to lay the foundation for the second cycle of coding. In the second cycle of coding, I synthesized the first round of themes into overarching themes that crossed initial categories. Chapter Four discusses the themes in detail, but categories that emerged in this first round are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: First Cycle Coding Scheme

Initial Descriptive Themes		Primary Themes
Collecting and collating case information		Time and Effort Necessary to Prepare a QSR Review
Seeking permission and partnership		
Learning about and explaining the QSR process		
During preparation		The QSR Review as a Practice Improvement Strategy
During the review		
During feedback and after the review	Feelings associated with feedback Aligned perspectives on case circumstances Feasibility of next steps	
Case Failure		QSR and Best Practice Standards
Recommendations for future QSR		
Comparison between QSR and quantitative reviews		

In the second cycle of coding, I continued using *in vivo* coding. Because this method allowed me to stay very close to the participants’ own words, it seemed the most appropriate way to discuss the overarching themes that relate to the participants’ practice environment. Although

these overarching themes are based upon my synthesis of the first cycle themes and was therefore less structured around descriptive categories, I decided it was necessary to preserve the context of their descriptions in order to clearly and accurately portray these important themes about their practice environment. This is consistent with the goals of qualitative description, as the analysis is desirably descriptive and comprehensive, rather than interpretive or bound to predetermined theory (Neergaard et al., 2009; Sandelowski, 2009). The overarching themes, that are presented in detail in Chapter Five, are summarized in Table 3.

My goal in this qualitative description is achieving comprehensiveness through authenticity and credibility. Milne and Oberle (2005), in a case study of a qualitative descriptive study they undertook, propose that the question researchers should ask about data is “do the data fit this category or are they being made to fit?” as the true test of analytical integrity (p. 417). I applied this question when I made the transition from first cycle to second cycle coding, and I also applied it throughout as I outlined and organized the findings. As clear as this question seems, I did not experience cleanly categorized stages between first and second cycle coding and outlining findings. I visited the data many times throughout my initial immersion in the data as I wrote the analytic memos, transcribed the data, and coding. Even as I had outlined my findings, I still found myself revisiting this important question once I began writing Chapters Four and Five, but some ideas I could not clearly articulate. At this point, I changed the question slightly to: “do the participants’ words tell this story, or am I making up my own?” When participants’ own words could not clarify my elusive ideas, I stopped. That was how I decided I was trying to “make it fit” instead of telling the authentic story.

Table 3: Second Cycle Codes

Themes about Practice Context

Workers are Emotionally Invested in Practice	Frustration about what can actually be accomplished (workload)
Perceptions of External Pressures and the Multiple Systems in Child Welfare	Lack of understanding of family-centered practice goals by involved systems
	Positive relationships with partners
Perceptions of the Changing Nature of Child Welfare Work	Based on data systems and expectations

Computer software. I used NVivo Version 10 for Mac qualitative data analysis software by QSR International to organize the interview transcripts, my notes, and analytic memos as an assistive device in the analysis (2014). NVivo is particularly appropriate for each of these coding methods, as there are no limits to the size of data excerpted for codes. The word search functions also helped me initially organize key topics and phrases I wanted to make sure I followed up on to see if any meaningful themes emerged.

Member checking. Member checking qualitative findings with individual participants offers an important way to enhance the trustworthiness of your data, because you give participants a chance to clarify their own statements and endorse the meaning the researcher has made from their data. However, two critical issues related to working with caseload-carrying child welfare staff influenced decisions related to methods in this study. One was time – it is unlikely that a case manager or supervisor, or administrator, given the circumstances of the week, will have the resources to sit down and review an analytic memo or preliminary analysis of their interview. The quality of the interview process and the ability to clarify statements

during them is critical for this reason. Although another potential solution to this problem could have been to take site-specific information and review it with an administrator only, this introduces risk to participants if the information results in the administrator perceiving their coworkers feedback negatively. Therefore, I used two strategies to help ensure that I “got it right” in comprehending what the participants have said (Creswell, 2014; Milne & Oberle, 2005; Padgett, 2008; Saldana, 2013). First, I used member checking during the interviews when asking follow-up questions and to rephrase certain responses to make sure, with the participants available to me, that I understood their meaning. After the initial first cycle of coding, I sent out a brief, two-page executive-type summary of major findings describing the QSR process and the recommendations embedded in the conversations to all the participants and the state research liaisons as “preliminary analysis” (see Appendix B). Accompanying this document was an invitation to review and respond, should participants want to add to or clarify the preliminary analysis in the document. My idea was to apply any feedback they return in the analysis as I will the coding peer review, with the main objective to ensure trustworthiness and integrity of the data (Dumbrill, 2006). I did not receive any feedback from this process.

In my initial proposal, I planned on adopting a peer-checking approach to “test” my codes. I thought this would have benefit based upon my confidence in my colleagues’ research experience and skill. I maintain this confidence in my colleagues. However, because of the pilot interview, the fact that I transcribed all the interviews myself, and because of the member checking that occurred with the participants and state liaisons, the benefit of peer-checking became less clear. As the themes emerged, it became clear that the codes were heavily dependent on the practice context. Thus, member checking directly with the participants during and after the reviews was more useful in clarifying important themes related to the context of the

child welfare practice environment. Because the codes relate heavily to this context, it did not seem that the value added by a peer who is unfamiliar with the practice context would strengthen the analysis. I became concerned that a peer coding check might result in identifying themes that would be more consistent with a content-analysis type of inquiry. Although I think there is potential to reveal interesting trends in the discussion of child welfare evaluation and practice, I believe this would veer away from the direction of the questions asked in this study. Therefore, I decided to eliminate this step from the data analysis process.

Ethics

The major ethical considerations for this research included the protection of the human subjects/participants involved, maintaining the integrity of my research given my background with the subject, and managing conflicts of interest. I submitted an IRB proposal that included written materials related to informed consent, confidentiality, the voluntary nature of participation, as well as avoiding harm and acknowledging the risks inherent in this study for the participants. In addition to IRB approval at the University of Alabama, it was necessary to secure approval from research review boards in the states in which I wished to carry out the research. Many human serving public agencies that maintain personally identifying information about clients administer their own research review boards, as these agencies are frequently approached by researchers seeking access to confidential records. One board did request that I change the informed consent to reflect that this study was part of dissertation research, and include their research review board contact information in the consent form. I submitted an IRB revision to create a unique consent form for use in that state only, to avoid revealing the name of participating states to the others. I considered these requests through the lens of beneficence, justice, and respect.

The overarching goal of my work is to produce something with practical value, so I have no objection to sharing information with the states and built that in in the member checking process. I anticipated that the member checking process would be an area where review boards might request more specific information, but they did not. States did request information about each other's liaisons, seeking information from other peers in the QSR process. Because state email addresses reveal the name of the states, I created a google doc that the state research liaisons could "opt-in" to with their own personal information to communicate with each other. Decisions were made based upon the ability to be consistent with our institutions IRB standards about protecting participants, and were negotiated prior to data collection at that site.

Informed consent, in this research, entailed a great deal of transparency. The research questions were available to participants without threatening any results, in one instance a participant asked for some specific questions to think about before we met for the interview. I responded with the research questions, and we did have a very efficient and detailed conversation. Because data collection was face-to-face or one-to-one over the phone, anonymity was impossible at this stage. Confidentiality was ensured by assigning numbers to interviews and not storing the names of participants, just job titles within the agency. Anonymity was ensured in the reporting phase, as it is unnecessary to use names and locations beyond general description by job title. In a few instances as I wrote up the findings, I did identify when participants were from the same site or different sites when that context was important to explaining the finding. It was unnecessary to identify participants' or their location further.

All participation was voluntary. From a pragmatic perspective, this type of research in direct practice settings must be flexible on timing and able to manage surprises – it is very important that participants understand that my ethical orientation is that case needs take priority.

As anticipated, in a few instances an urgent situation occurred during a scheduled interview. During data collection, two interviews were successfully rescheduled but three were ultimately cancelled. I believe that the number of interviews I was able to complete did result in a comprehensive description of the QSR process.

This research fell under the expedited IRB protocol, as the “minimal risk of harm” standard was met. Although I was asking people to think about and discuss topics that could reasonably be expected to emerge in a natural work setting, there was still a risk that the research context could provoke anxiety or worry that a person’s job or job performance will be affected by participating. Within the agencies, there was a definite interest in participating based on getting feedback – even if anonymous feedback – from workers about the QSR process. As discussed, some sites’ participants were very open with each other about their participation. My sense was that this had more to do with the openness between each other as colleagues, rather than any influence from the central state office. However, the participants had an understanding of their agency’s priorities regarding casework and evaluation priorities because these were shared during the interviews. Feedback about the QSR process and about these priorities was not unanimously positive or negative. Because of this, and because no unanticipated circumstances arose in which I was unable to maintain confidentiality, I am encouraged that this means participants did not feel undue anxiety about discussing these topics.

I sought permission from each participant before recording while assuring the participant that the information gathered would only be used for research purposes and remain confidential. I asked permission to take notes as well, although in interviews with the recorder in use I took far fewer notes during the interviews than in the ones where I did not use the recorder. These notes assisted with analytic memo development in addition to being the primary source for the

interviews that were not recorded. I was fortunate that I did not experience any recording failures and was able to successfully backup recordings immediately into the University's password protected cloud storage system.

To the best of my ability, I used best professional practices in managing distress in the interviews. Most of the interviews were neutral or positive in emotional tone, but one worker became visibly teary when speaking about the practice environment in her state and another expressed anger about some of the follow up processes to the QSR process. Frustration about the working environment emerged in several interviews, but not to the degree that stopping the interview seemed necessary or, for that matter, kind. Participants showing the most visibly emotional responses during the interviews seemed to benefit from explaining their frustrations.

The integrity of my research position in light of my previous experience is important to consider from an ethical standpoint as well. As I discussed earlier, I have previous experience with the QSR process and have already had some opportunities to explore the ways it has been successful in supporting best practice and seen situations where it did not. I am approaching the QSR process as a "given," that is, I am not trying to establish a pro-QSR or anti-QSR position in this research, or even something in the middle. I am simply accepting that the process occurs and am seeking to understand how it supports learning among child welfare staff. There is a potential conflict of interest that may result should I not be transparent about this position. I have earned a salary and been paid as an independent consultant conducting QSR reviews. This research has added to my professional skill set, and I will be seeking opportunities to continue to apply those.

In summary, this study design reflects the qualitative nature of the questions I attempt to answer. The semi-structured interview questions reflect the necessity of being flexible when

asking participants about their experience and thoughts about it. The quality of the data collection was assisted by the process of a pilot interview as well as in using experience gleaned from early interviews in subsequent interviews. Two major cycles of coding drove analysis and synthesis of the data and the themes that emerged within them. The use of *in vivo* coding, to reflect participants' words and contextual description, reflects principles of authenticity and credibility of the data. The next chapters describe the findings from these interviews.

CHAPTER FOUR: INITIAL CODES AND DESCRIPTIVE THEMES

The coding strategy and major categories that emerged are presented at the beginning of this chapter, followed by the findings from the fourteen interviews. The initial codes, described here, were organized specifically around the principle of producing the requirements of trustworthy qualitative description's methodological purpose. The themes that emerged from these initial codes that describe the QSR process include the time and effort necessary to prepare a case for review, the function of the review as a practice intervention as well as an evaluation, and the ability of the qualitative service review process to operationalize best practices and to clarify where best practices have yet to be defined. These major themes serve as the framework for the comprehensive description of the experience of QSR from a direct practice perspective. They also inform themes interwoven across these descriptive categories. The connecting themes, those that emerged from the descriptive themes, provide insight into the ways the context of the practice environment influences learning about practice, including the changing nature of the child welfare workplace in relationship to documentation versus face-to-face casework activities, the involvement of multiple systems in child welfare practice, and the emotional investment caseworkers report making in their practice. The connecting themes will be explored in Chapter Five: Connecting Descriptive Themes to the Practice Environment. A summary of findings and discussion will be included in Chapter Six. After presenting findings to illustrate the initial codes and primary descriptive themes and sub-themes, this chapter will conclude with recommendations from participants about improvements to the qualitative service review (QSR) process in the future.

Descriptive Theme 1: Time and Effort Necessary to Prepare a QSR Review

Before the review, caseworkers and supervisors reported that they spent a considerable amount of time preparing the case for review. Participants from each site discussed that someone outside their local office would select the cases randomly for the review, recognizing that this was an administrative feat in itself. Workers, supervisors, and office administrators also described the tasks required to prepare the case for review, which ranged from creating specific documents unique to the QSR review to preparing families and community partners for the review. Workers, supervisors, and administrators had different roles in QSR preparation. Some of the tasks were distributed differently across sites. However, the purpose of preparing for a review with an eye toward making the review process go as smoothly as possible for reviewers, families and service providers involved in the cases being reviewed and toward presenting the cases as comprehensively as possible was shared across all sites. To that end, in addition to the administrative tasks, agency staff spent time seeking partnership and permission from families and community service providers to help with the QSR review. They also spent time learning about and explaining the QSR process and what reviewers would be looking for to staff at the agency.

Preparing for the QSR review: Collecting and collating case information. Workers reported finding out that one of their cases had been selected for the review by finding a colored folder at their desk or being sent a list of cases by administrative staff. The colored folder, in particular, elicited humorous responses among participants, who joked about not wanting to find that folder on your desk. As one participant said, initially:

But also preparing the paperwork, like on top of everything that you already had to do, like you're still doing all your job activities and duties, but we were requested to um, fill out paperwork. Like a review of information. But to me a lot of that information was

already available through systems that they could have accessed, like our updated service plans and things like that. We were duplicating a lot of information, so we had to do a write-up review and then attach all of our other paperwork too with all that. So, it was a lot of busywork to do that, so the just-setting-it-up-part of it was a lot of work.]. Like, when other people didn't get chosen, they were like "yeah!" [laughing] So, you were not lucky to have to go through it.

Tasks associated with preparing a case for QSR review included gathering information from the case file, including service plans, and then preparing a timeline or mini-biography of the case to help condense critical information for reviewers. Participants also reported that ensuring the file and the paperwork, including case narratives within it, were up to date was a crucial step in preparation, and the degree to which this added to their workload was discussed across a range of being a little extra work to a lot of extra work. Everyday tasks associated with their regular workload did not change to accommodate the time necessary to prepare for the QSR, although some participants reported different degrees of burden:

Well, there's a lot of preparation, I think...in addition you know there's quite a few things we fill out, where we're like gathering information. Gathering service plans, ISPs, different documents so that we're ready, so they have the knowledge, which is also, can be cumbersome.

Like I said, we just have to get our files in order, make sure everything's in there, the case notes of course have to be up to date which I know is something everybody struggles with. That's I guess the biggest part, getting everything in, actually in the file instead of pieces here and there, in the computer in our heads, you know.

The first thing is to make sure everything that needs to be in the file is in the file.

I like for them [the reviewers] to be able to pick up the paper and just read it and understand, "oh this is what happened when that happened"...you know it's more work. Really not a lot of work, it's just a little bit of extra work that, you know. For me it's just getting the stories right, you know, explaining, I have a, I kind of have a hard time explaining things, [laughing] so that's the hard part.

For a few workers, the burden of the preparation was ameliorated somewhat by what they gained from it. One worker described the QSR check list as providing "good next steps" that are useful for keeping up with every case file, and another noted,

I mean, it was a LOT of work and it took up a lot of our time, I think, but I mean it was such a positive experience.

I really did feel like every one of those people [QSR reviewers] read everything that I submitted so it didn't feel like a waste of time to me, they came in prepared and knowledgeable and that was very helpful so I think that's extremely important too.

Workers also discussed the job aids available to help them in the task of preparing a case for the review. These were lists of steps workers received to help them prepare the case, and the workers that talked about these lists described them as helpful in managing the preparation tasks. In some places, these took the forms of binders, which served as a "shell" for the workers to put information into, and in others, checklists and step-by-step instructions were provided.

The explicit purpose of a case file is to document what is happening in a case and why decisions were made. Workers prepare the selected case file for QSR review to help reviewers' gathering as much information as possible about each case. Implicitly, the participants' descriptions of preparing a case file for QSR reveal the importance of, yet difficulty of, fully describing a case in context even with the computer systems and amount of data collected within them. Caseworkers spend a great deal of time documenting case information in these systems, and indeed there are federal requirements about use of information systems in child welfare that inform funding decisions as well. Although the intent of these systems is to facilitate case practice by collecting case information, these systems themselves emerge as a barrier to spending time with families and performing functions of case practice that require interaction between people. Ultimately, the same worker who talked about duplication of effort because the preparation documents were not accessed through the computer system summed up the preparation process with these words:

I don't know how to make it less work for us. There's just no way to do that, for people to get a good understanding of the case and case history and things like that.

The paradox that collecting more information, yet still not being able to use what is collected to fully explain a case for a qualitative service review, will be discussed more fully in Chapter Five.

In the QSR process, the review itself initially begins when reviewers read the information about the case that is provided by the workers. Then the reviewers conduct their first interview with the worker. To the extent that this is possible, in the QSR process the preferred sequence of interviews begins with the worker or supervisor. In order for feedback to be as meaningful as possible, hearing the workers' perspective first helps reviewers assess the coherence of team members around plans the worker is responsible for coordinating. Also, this allows the worker to have a chance to ask questions of reviewers early in the review process. This is also a practical preference because reviewers have a chance to ask the worker any questions they might have about the rest of the interview schedule, for instance, clarifying driving directions or getting hints from the worker about strategies to engage the target child or youth in an interview. Because of this preference, during an office's QSR review where multiple cases are being reviewed at the same time, multiple caseworkers can be involved in their interviews at the same time.

Preparing for the QSR review: Seeking permission and partnership. All Participants were aware that non-caseload carrying staff completed important functions of the review, "behind the scenes work", including organizing caseload reports in order to produce a random sample and support in organizing logistics about office space so that QSR reviewers and workers could have private space for their interviews. In two states, administrative staff in offices gathered the information directly from the computer system, securing consents from QSR Participants, and scheduling interviews and making sure the QSR reviewers had enough time between interviews to travel. A worker in one state described the challenges their office's staff

person responsible for these pre-review activities faced, while a worker from another state described the teamwork that went into preparation:

The last QSR we had a specific individual in the building who was kind of responsible for coordinating and that is quite a feat. Because, you know, they have to go through the...legality of it, so, signing consents, everybody, then really engaging the whole entire team...coordinating that so everybody can come, so it took her like weeks to coordinate...full day weeks, so kudos to her because she did a really amazing job making sure that just even down to where they were going to be, you know what I mean, this building is not that big. Who was going to drive where, and then the people coming from out [outside the county where the review occurred] they don't realize that for us, you know sometimes we might drive for an hour somewhere that's in our county so just the logistics of it all. That is quite the overall project.

Myself and the administrator here are the ones that organized it for our agency. We probably spent as much as maybe a year before that, getting ready for that...we met with our team, which was myself, our director, a practice improvement specialist from [a resource center] and then two regional reps as well. We met with them about once a month to update them on where we were with things.

Explaining the QSR process to families and inviting them to participate fell upon the worker, in each site. Workers in the two newest states to implement QSR identified challenges in securing some families' participation, attributing this to the randomness of the sample resulting in the inclusion of families that workers themselves would not expect to participate. In the few instances when families declined, this had the effect of making the preparation process longer for the agency, as replacement cases needed to be pulled and the scheduling process restarted. Workers in the state that had been conducting QSR the longest did not mention this as a challenge, suggesting that perhaps the unfamiliarity of QSR to both families and workers might be part of the reason that families declined to participate and that this might change over time as both agency staff, community partners, and other families become more familiar with QSR and strategies to engage families and empower them to participate.

It was sort of difficult, because it was a random, you randomly chose cases and then you had to go out and to get people to want to, like, our clients to want to participate was very difficult. Like, my people did not want other people knowing what was going on, didn't want to talk, even though we attempted to engage them, but because of their mental

health, and some of them had paranoia, and not wanting to share their stories and things like that, not wanting to have other people in their home, I think my first initial one we went through three random cycles of people, that said no, said no, and then finally somebody did, and we went through that... I approached it, like “you were randomly chosen to talk about how we do things in our community, and if there’s things you think that we could do better or change, I think you would be a good person to talk about that and to talk about your experiences.”

Our assistant administrator reached out to the families obviously to get permission to do that.

I believe the cases are selected pretty much randomly, and then so would need to contact the family to see if they’re willing to participate in the QSR. So we can try to get them an overview of what is going to happen.

QSR reviews are conducted by reviewer pairs. Often, the idea is to pair an experienced reviewer with developing reviewers, who receive QSR reviewer training and participate in several reviews before becoming experienced reviewers themselves; or, somebody who is participating as a “shadow,” usually a worker from a different area of the state or community partner who participate in one QSR as an educational opportunity that may or may not include training prior to the review. As a result, agencies are responsible for providing many of the reviewers for the QSR, from a pool of community partners or from other counties within the agency. In the state with the longest experience implementing QSR, the agency had a system of maintaining “certified reviewers.” These would be experienced reviewers, from within and outside the agency, who completed reviewer training and conducted two reviews a year. In the sites newest to implementing QSR, one was working towards maintaining a group of certified reviewers from within the agency’s central office quality assurance staff and laying a foundation for expanding their pool over time as the other state had done. In the second site new to implementing QSR, the agency directed attention into recruiting community partners to be reviewers and in providing reviewer training and opportunities to “shadow” for agency staff. In this state, the workers understood the agency’s focus to be primarily on providing opportunities for workers and service providers to experience QSR. These three different approaches to

recruiting reviewers speaks to the different lengths of time the QSR has been in place in the states, and it also gives some insight into the states' uses of and long-term view for the QSR process. In the first two states, the reviewer certification process follows a strategy for building a consistent and long-term reviewer corps; for the third, the state is using the QSR process as a framework for communicating best practice principles to public and private agency workers involved in child welfare and to provide training around qualitative review of these principles to workers. For the administrators and supervisors in the third site, recruiting participants involved some strategy, as community agencies also face resource-related challenges, including time:

I know our administrator went to different service providers that we utilize or that our clients utilize and kind of just explained the process to them because we were really essentially asking them to kind of donate their time to us to do it...the director and I just kind of made a list of people that we work with that know about are services and that we thought would be willing to participate.

I'll say, to a therapist for example, "have you done this QSR before?"...and they're like, "oh yeah, I do these all the time"... It's nice to know our community gets what we're doing and why we are doing it...it's just a really big investment on their part as well...I'm seeing our teams become stronger

Preparing for the QSR review: Learning about and explaining the QSR process.

Another element of QSR preparation related to learning about the purpose and use of this format of review and its relationship to practice. In addition to preparing for the mechanics of the review, including preparing case files and participating in interviews, workers, supervisors, and administrators discussed the activities that went into preparing for QSR and the feedback it provides about practice.

After the workers get the list, Participants discussed the cases and the QSR process. While some Participants described a conversation between a worker and supervisor, others talked about coordinated discussions and trainings that involved multiple staff at one time.

As a supervisor, it's kind of an easy way...I'm not being personally reviewed so I think it's less threatening and less, maybe, personalized...once we identify the case that's going to be reviewed as a supervisor then my role is to help that worker prepare to present their story. And...offer moral support that way and make sure that we explain to the team the process.

As a worker, it was more of the supervisor coming in, looking at my case, make sure I've done my teaming and those kind of things...[as an administrator] in our region, when we get that first pull, as administrators we gather and look at every one of those cases that was pulled.

One of the first things we did was we started talking about the indicators with our staff. Um, even the ones that weren't involved with QSR just so that they knew um, like what the QSR was looking at...and we did that at staff meetings, and we would talk about 2 or 3 indicators each time.

While Participants generally noted the importance of preparing cases for review and educating staff about the QSR process and how it is evaluating practice, there was also discussion about how some staff put a lot of time trying to improve things about casework prior to the review. The benefits of attending to casework during the weeks leading up to the review will be discussed in a later section, but one respondent pointed out that relying on an opportunity to make changes during this period was not an effective strategy for promoting best practice throughout the life of a case or throughout an agency. One worker, whose interview was not recorded, ardently asserted that this part of the QSR process was like "someone going through your underwear drawers," although the QSR check list guiding this preparation was not clearly relatable to actual case practice. Some shared ideas about ways to improve the learning and explaining process related to QSR, by performing these preparation activities more frequently or throughout the year, with one worker stating simply that workers should refer to the QSR outcomes every day as part of your work. Another participant suggested that QSR not be a yearly process, that it could be useful and serve as a training function for new workers but that it was not necessary to spend the resources conducting the review on the same workers year after year. The feedback from the following respondent supports the theme of workers and their immediate

supervisors feeling responsible for the case scores and QSR evaluation, whereas staff who are focused on agency performance across teams are less focused on preparing for a singular QSR review and more on agency performance more broadly:

I do see some reviewers and supervisors that do a big rollout when it's the QSR time and they want to staff those cases to death, and do all that, and I don't see that's as helpful. I would rather be working on those issues all year and then when the one case gets pulled, my worker understands "ok they're going to be looking at teaming, this is what I've done all year"...so I try not to get into a big deal, like we prepare, but they've been familiar with it all year...I don't think the flurry of activity is as beneficial to the kids and families we serve or our scores, to be honest. I think that's the risk that supervisors and workers get into is that, that maybe just my thing – I think the region says don't just do a flurry of activity right around review time. I mean, the real objective if you care about this work is, if your standard of practice is as high as it can be, that you're performing most of those areas that you focus on in the review all year round so that we serve our families the best. So, I think the region tries to do that.

The above themes convey the degree of effort and amount of time necessary to prepare and conduct a QSR review, from making sure that the file is complete to scheduling interviews and securing participation from families and service providers to coordinating reviewer participants. In addition to the time and effort of agency staff and community partners, a QSR review involves time of families, children and youth, service providers and family supports who participate as participants in the process. Given the investment of time made to conduct a QSR, it is not surprising that participants also spent considerable time in the interviews discussing the effect QSR has as on practice.

Descriptive Theme 2: The QSR Review as a Practice Improvement Strategy

The QSR process is designed to provide case-specific feedback directly to workers and supervisors, and reviewers also present cases in a "grand round" session. In these sessions, reviewers from several cases and agency staff present findings from the cases with the goal to being to identify common trends across case practice or systemic issues that are facilitating or hindering implementation of best practice. The QSR feedback is designed to be honest but

strengths-based, that is, starting with what is working in case practice and within the broader child welfare system, discussing the elements of practice or system functioning that are not working effectively as opportunities for improvement, and then framing next steps to improve the case around the strengths and resources that are present. This is consistent with family-centered practice and, by design, is intended to serve as a model for best practices when interacting with families and child and family teams. This strengths-based approach also reflects best practices in supervision used by agencies following a learning organization model. After the QSR, reviewers write detailed narratives about the case that provide a written reference to the circumstances of the case at the time of the review and the primary factors that influenced the scoring. These feedback processes are practice interventions, as they provide information and suggested next steps to bring practice performance up to the highest level possible. Outside of these direct processes, reviewers also discussed the QSR serving as a practice intervention indirectly, during preparation, during the review, and after formal feedback processes concluded.

Practice improvement during QSR preparation. Participants mentioned that having the QSR coming allows workers and supervisors to spend time looking at one case specifically, with it seeming like a necessary work process rather than as something distracting from regular workload duties. Because of this, workers have the opportunity to address something that might have been overlooked or not completed as quickly in the routine course of casework. One participant, whose interview was not recorded, noted that the preparation provides a “good next step” on an individual case pulled for review. Another humorously described this part of the process as a good fit for her personality, by saying “I’m kind of a perfectionist in general, and so I don’t like for – no one does – just to have flaws pointed out. I’d rather point the flaw out myself first...so I can fix it before anyone notices [laughing].” Some participants also stated that

a positive result of looking deeply at one case is that this helps them think deeply about practice in their other cases, especially as child welfare staff discussed QSR indicators in preparation for the review:

In our region, when we get that first pull, as administrators we gather and look at every one of those cases that was pulled. And then when we go through debriefs, you know we're tracking ourselves where we're at, and then in the end when all the stories are back we are self-evaluating ourselves about "do we have some trends? Is there an area that we need to focus on?" Obviously they give us an area for us to focus on, but we know our scores before they do because we're tracking that.

An example of a trend that affected teaming agency wide emerged during these prep activities. A worker mentioned that it was clear teachers were not participating in child and family team activities to the degree that would be optimal for children and families. The barrier was access to teachers; they have limited flexibility in their work hours during the day and are not compensated for participating in a child and family team at night. Staff were able to develop strategies to resolve that barrier by figuring out ways to work with teachers that achieved the objective of child and family teaming that did not require them to leave school to attend meetings.

Practice improvement during the review. Workers and supervisors, after preparing the cases and sitting down with QSR reviewers for the first interviews about their case, do not have many other QSR-related demands on their time while the review is occurring until feedback – likely a relief given the amount of effort described in preparing for the review. However, while the review is occurring there are likely to be workers and supervisors from other areas of the state participating as reviewers, an opportunity for them to learn about best practice through the lens of the QSR evaluation process and carry lessons learned back to their home offices. In each state, reviewers went out on cases in teams of two. This system has a dual purpose of improving the quality of the review itself by taking a "two heads are better than one" approach to assessing

child welfare practice while also allowing agencies to provide multiple staff with the opportunity to participate as a reviewer. All participants had been responsible for casework on a case that was reviewed using the QSR process, and some participants had also participated in the QSR review as reviewers themselves. They talked about how participating as a reviewer helped them understand the practice concepts that the QSR measures. This helped them identify opportunities for improvement within their own cases. It also helped them communicate QSR processes to coworkers and the workers they supervised during preparation and feedback. They could also better empathize with the anxiety workers felt associated with being reviewed.

I recently had the opportunity to mentor a worker through the QSR process, a shadow. And to be able to hear back from them that me working with them opened their eyes to what the process was and how it's supposed to be and how to talk with each other and what kind of things to look for, that was good for me. I was glad that at least it's able to make sense and able to help others. Because I believe if this person understands it then they can go back to apply it to their role, maybe help someone else, one of their coworkers.

Having gone through the process [as a worker being reviewed] I first of all know how they are feeling because of course everybody feels scrutinized, it's just normal, because your case is being reviewed. So I'm able to give perspective to that, to my workers...I think it was especially helpful when I went out and did a review of the QSR, I think that was really changing, a changing perspective for me that was good.

The reason I did a review was because I wanted to see what other caseworkers did. You know, I like to know "am I doing this right?" Even though I know it's right, but, "what do they do differently?" and "what can I do to improve even more?" you know, to help these families, that's how I look at it.

Participants also discussed families' experiences with the review. Some participants reported their families' experience was positive, but for others, the review experience was negative and provided additional support for the workers' assessment that those parents were experiencing functional challenges that affected their working relationship.

Some of the families that went through it did appreciate it and I think enjoyed talking about how to make things better...the people that I think struggled with it and didn't do well I think purely were because of their past experiences and mental health issues.

Interviews that occur during the review are sources of important information for case practice, but comments by several respondents indicate that on some level the inclusion or exclusion of people from the interview schedule and review process mirrors the process of engagement and teaming, cornerstones of family-centered practice models. This occurs through the preparation processes described previously, as agency staff worked to introduce the QSR process to community partners and secure participation from families and other respondents. Addressing case issues that are evident prior to the review is, in some ways, a process that reflects principles of assessment in cases and prioritizing next steps. The QSR review process of interviewing mirrors the engagement and teamwork of casework. The relationship between these indicators and the family-centered practice models will be explored further in a later section.

The biggest things I see that have the most benefit for children and our families, we get a frontline look at exactly how the workers are engaging with children and families, and the team members that we need to be involved with moving a case forward...we're talking to everybody on these reviews.

I know when we had ours we had a [private agency] and a current worker, counselors, we use a lot of ... we work together on the service we provide towards family preservation. They helped on the review as well, and I think that all of the different aspects I think it helps when we all sit down and talk together, I think that helps a lot. I can't think of any other services that we didn't have involved at our QSR.

It's definitely beneficial that we are actually asking the clients how things, how they think things are going...the interviews with [our clients] explores with them about what they perceive that we've done well or need to improve on...we're actually talking with people that we're working with. And it's not just "did we send a letter or not," it's, "were they engaging," "did they really help you in making life-changing, I guess, life-changes for you by talking with you and working with you."

The comprehensive approach to the review was not evident to one worker, whose interview was not recorded. This worker, who had been reviewed in six or seven QSRs during her tenure at the agency and reported receiving high scores each time, felt that the process was missing crucial information because it did not ask these community partners the same kinds of

questions asked of the workers. For example, if the reviewers ask workers, essentially, “what are you doing to support practice?” they should also ask what judges are doing to support practice. If evidence of best practice includes descriptions of how workers are supporting the family, then District Attorney’s and GALs should also be asked how they are supporting families and the workers. From this perspective, if the QSR only explains how the worker supports families or the child welfare agency supports practice, then the QSR review is not truly systemic.

Practice improvement in feedback and after the review. Feedback is, by design, the most overt process in QSR designed to improve practice. A great deal of participants’ discussion focused on feedback, in part because it directly relates to the research questions about QSR’s utility as a strategy for learning and implementing best practice, but also because the feelings elicited in feedback reveal the emotional connection workers feel with their families. Participants used words that describe feelings throughout their discussion of the structure and mechanics of feedback and in the discussion of the effect feedback had on practice after the review.

In describing the process of feedback, participants identified practice intervention functions that the QSR process serviced during preparation and during the QSR interviews. By design, QSR provides case-specific feedback that includes next steps with the explicit purpose of functioning as a practice improvement strategy in the agencies that use it.

So one of the things that they do is the reviewers will actually meet with the caseworker and the supervisor and give them feedback of the things that they noticed...afterwards they talk to them about their strengths and also about things they thought they could do better.

[supervisor] I’m involved in the exit review where they tell us what our story is going to score, and the areas that we didn’t score so well and maybe what areas we can improve.

During feedback and in activities after the review, participants identified ways the QSR process influenced subsequent case practice, in the case that was reviewed as well as in their other cases. These next steps were often developed with or clarified by conversations with other agency staff, including supervisors and administrators, who in turn spoke of their conversations about practice improvement with workers after feedback.

If you do have a few recommendations you take them and try to incorporate them in your current cases and stuff like that. Your supervisor will go over it again and be [in feedback] with us so she knows what we needs to work on...I just try to use what I've done with that case that made it so, uh, successful. Just kind of incorporate what you've done in that case into another one if you get another one that's kind of like it, you know.

QSR feedback provides next steps to improve practice, but it also provides information about what is working well or are strengths. As one worker noted, it's nice to be recognized and QSR tries to reward good practice, and another described hearing about what is working in a case as "constructive." The process makes agency administration aware of good work, and who is doing it, and then the agency has to acknowledge it. Some participants expressed surprise about the positivity of the feedback and the amount of participation workers had in the feedback on their own cases. Some participants emphasized the two-way nature of the feedback session, noting that reviewers asked them for clarification about the case, and in turn workers could ask questions of reviewers to clarify scoring and practice issues. For others, it was meaningful to hear positive feedback about their work, especially when some of that positive feedback came from the parents' interviews.

I thought we were doing an amazing job – and they validated that, like “wow, you guys have a great team, you communicate really well, have you thought of these things?” it wasn't like, “you did this wrong,” it was like, “you're already doing a great job, how about we enhance it and do these things.”

The QSR feedback, really it gave us key areas that we needed to focus on, like the father engagement, but it also, it felt good to hear that we're doing a good job too.

It was an interesting exchange, in my case, they didn't ask for any changes.

Well, the feedback's good because at least I realize, you know...it validates my work as being appropriate, you know...you go the extra mile or something, so I do, they catch it when they're reviewing all this...I haven't really had a lot to work on so [laughing] I like it.

I think that it was good for them too because they heard positive things...it's very rare that someone calls and just says "hey, you did a good job with my family" so I think that it was also beneficial because they were able to hear positive things that the families said as well.

One site makes a concerted effort to engage the entire office staff in improvement efforts towards the indicator identified in the most recent QSR as needing the most attention by creating an incentive-based team approach that was shared during staff meetings. A worker at this site said this made improvement efforts fun. The worker noted that her case was one that had rated low on the indicator too – teamwork – and that speaking to her supervisors helped clarify the reviewers' thinking to help her with her own improvement efforts. Another worker from this same site, however, said that this approach could be problematic when the reasons for low scores were not things the worker could easily correct. For example, one worker noted that a case can fail safety if a child runs away before the review or is suicidal. Even though the worker emphasized that administrators make efforts to minimize any workers' feelings of personal responsibility, the amount of praise and monetary incentives that are directed towards workers whose cases score well undermines this message.

One area secured further training as a strategy to improve best practice, while a worker there saw an opportunity to change certain approaches in her individual practice.

As a result of the QSR, our administrator was able to arrange training based on our weakest areas as an agency as a whole. So one of our weakest areas was the father engagement piece. So she was able to have trainers come to us, to really focus on this, on that area, as it pertains to our county specifically...[Now] so doing a better job at explaining things, rather than just explaining the outcome that I want. So really just taking the time to explain our procedures, explain what the state law is, and explain what their involvement is going to look like, rather than "your kid's in care, you need to come to these meetings, you need to do this"...parents don't always follow through, but I have definitely gotten, I guess a more positive attitude ... obviously they're not happy their kid

is in care, but I think just being able to get them to be even open to having a working relationship with me, I think that's the first step because I can't do anything else unless they are on the same page as I am.

The QSR review was enhanced by the agencies' outreach and inclusion of other stakeholders. Participants from the state that had been using QSR for the longest amount of time also described how follow up can be enhanced by sharing results with other county offices within the state as well as external stakeholders.

We saw that [another region] did great plans, and there was nothing stopping us from calling them and saying "tell us about that process, how did you do it?"

We try to be pretty open about the results within our team's specific issues, and then region-wide with the indicators. As a whole I think our building learned quite a bit from that... We are seeing our court personnel being more involved in those [child and family team] meetings and understanding the importance of those meetings., we're also seeing the mental health therapists out in the region being more participatory or at least providing more information for those meetings...you know, I'm seeing our teams become stronger.

As far as like the service providers, in my interactions with each other and the way that we work with that family, I felt like it had a positive impact, just because I felt like we could be more open with one another and we were able to kind of get on the same page as far as what the family needed and how we needed to approach them.

Feelings associated with feedback. Participants discussed feedback using emotional words – it was very evident that the feelings associated with feedback were salient to respondents. Two main sub-themes emerged from the discussion about feedback that influenced the feelings workers had about their feedback. First, the degree to which the worker's, supervisor's and the reviewers' understanding of the facts on the case aligned so that the conversations the workers and reviewers had about the case were "on the same page" and so next steps seemed relevant to the case. Second, the workers' perception about the feasibility of the suggested next steps was important in making the QSR review relevant to the worker. Revealed in the feasibility of next steps is the perceived degree of control the worker felt they had over the case circumstances, a critical element influencing feelings about their job as caseworkers and the

practice environment in which they worked. Atop this complex case context scaffold, next steps provided could result in optimism and excitement when next steps seemed workable, or could result in frustration and increased feelings of helplessness when next steps seemed impossible to implement.

Aligned perspectives on case circumstances. Participants welcomed the pleasant surprises of hearing feedback from families about them that was positive in feedback. A dominant theme emerging in discussion about feedback was that it was “affirming” and “validating” when practice strategies were evaluated as effective. Participants described their feelings when explaining and describing this part of the QSR process. The QSR process’ ability to reveal the amount of work case managers were putting into a case was also part of these conversations, and the emotional investment that accompanies that effort is evident. The emotional investment that workers make in practice will be discussed further in Chapter 5. Here, the type of feedback that the QSR can provide because of its interview-based structure is a theme that will be explored in more detail in a following section. The quotes below are examples of the emphasis participants placed in their descriptions of feedback on the alignment between the worker and reviewer perspectives about key issues within a case.

I think that the QSR feedback just kind of affirms what we’re already doing, and a lot of the reviewer are [agency] representatives [and] all said our county is kind of ahead of the game.

I think there was a lot of validation because I had invested a lot of time [into the casework].

You know, you do things, extra things that you really didn’t have to do but you do it because you really want to help the families and that’s noticeable when they’re giving you feedback. The planning, they go through your plans and how accurate or how, if it fits the families.

I think that we had the same thought process of where things were going and what was going to happen...we were kind of on the same path. But they did give some ideas about recommendations about seeking out things. The second case that I had reviewed was

right in the middle of court proceedings...so they made some good recommendations about reaching out to other people or other services for mom and things like that.

In my case they had a very manipulative mother...she did not con [the reviewers] and they figured out exactly what was going on and they saw the progress that had been made...so that part of it went well.

One reviewer praised the reviewers' comprehension of the difficulties of her case, and noted that the time reviewers have to spend interviewing people on the case makes a difference in the quality of information returned in feedback.

The case that I had reviewed was a difficult long case, that was very complicated. And um, the people who reviewed it really read it and really understood the different phases that it had gone through and met the people and talked to them, and were really able to sort that out. Um, and I don't know if it's because they had more time, um, sometimes people just don't have a lot of time, they do a cursory review of a case.

In addition to feeling validated when reviewers had similar experiences with family members' challenging behaviors, workers also expressed positive feedback from parents as a "good morale boost" to hear "parents don't hate me." On the other hand, there were instances where caseworker and supervisor interpretations of parents' behaviors and the reviewers' interpretation of parents' behaviors did not align. One worker also commented on the cultural factors that influence people's perceptions of safety and well-being, and that this applies to workers and reviewers alike.

And if you're talking about emotional connections that these children have with everybody in the community, so I'm sure there are two ways of looking at that. Whereas we're a small rural community, you can pretty much walk to the bad side of town anytime you want, when I moved here people said "stay away from the bad side of town" [rolling eyes] I was like "yeah, okay." I think that cultural piece of what is abuse and neglect is really important.

One participant at a site in which cases can "fail" QSR when a child is deemed unsafe, described a case failure that she disagreed with. In this case, the child had been choked by her brother in the foster home two weeks before the review. The worker noted that she and the foster parent felt this was normal, if extreme, sibling behavior that did not represent a safety

issue. It was of particular concern to supervisors that these experiences did not manifest later in case practice.

That kind of thing in the process that is disheartening, to see this parent it...had an effect on how the reviewer reviewed the case...[the reviewers felt] the worker was not doing a great job and that just was hard to see and the worker felt it. And the case didn't pass, and I won't say it's just because of that but I do feel like, we really did feel like that mom had an effect on how that reviewer looked at the case and that was tough. So I think we were fortunate to have a worker who was able to recognize that and has made it a point regardless of how difficult the parent is she will, she has always maintained the contact with the parent, even above and beyond what she actually needs to. So I feel like she took that lesson away from that, and probably the team as well.

I had a very clinically-minded reviewer reviewing a case, and everything recommendation-wise came clinical. And how they looked at the case was with a clinical eye, and not with the eyes the family had. So did the caseworker get frustrated with that? Yeah, but I don't think that they necessarily saw all the other times that this reviewer has reviewed and didn't get to see the pattern.

Direct practice staff who had been reviewers in a QSR shared their experience about feedback from the reviewer perspective, too. They attributed their approaches to providing feedback to their experience as workers, here too suggesting that the alignment of worker and reviewer on perspectives about the case and the context of case practice have a meaningful impact on the utility of feedback to workers. This also supports the idea that the worker and reviewer alignment works well from the reviewer perspective, too. Participants also resoundingly endorsed a recommendation that reviewers needed to be people with recent field experience and familiarity with policies and resources available in their area. This recommendation will be addressed in detail later.

They hooked me up with a woman from that area that worked in a provider [agency]. And so I felt that for me when I did the feedback it was a little hard for me to be critical of the caseworker and the supervisor, because that's what I did. So I thought she was there to pick up the slack that I wasn't able to because of my bias from doing that, you know what I mean?

I was a backup reviewer for another county. I would have to, I think I would have to set my caseworker role aside and really focus on what the criteria is for each score because you can do the best job in the world as a worker and be as engaging as possible but...if

you weren't able to get the family involved, and engaged, then the score is going to be lower.

A connecting theme that emerged in these interviews was that caseworkers are emotionally invested in their practice. Among all the processes that are included in a QSR, this emotional investment was most evident in feedback. One caseworker said she felt her review was a "happy surprise" because she heard good things about her practice. She remarked that workers deal with a lot of negativity, so positivity is noticed. One worker had a more dispassionate response, stating simply, "those of us who do this work are always under scrutiny and always fearing someone's going to come in without the experience to understand."

Participants who were caseworkers expressed their feelings associated with feedback most intensely, while participants who were supervisors and administrators expressed a more distant connection to the emotions associated with feedback about casework. One administrator noted,

Any good worker personalizes and internalizes somewhat when you have bad things that happen on a case, or you're reviewed or you know, you get feedback so, I think to some extent everybody still worries about it.

Supervisors and administrators play an important role in helping their workers process the feelings associated with the review, both in the way they support their workers one-on-one and in the office-wide practice improvement activities they implement after the review.

That mom had some severe mental health issues, and...stormed out of their interview because she was tired and wasn't going to deal with it any more. So it was nice for me to, for outsiders to kind of confirm what I was already struggling with...it's a little confirmation.

I guess it's the perspective, if you're the type of person that you're not, like, kind of open to that feedback, I could see how it could be like, "maybe..." but I don't feel like the people at the QSR even presented that way. I feel like it's presented very...like a growing opportunity. Like it's a privilege for them, they were so gracious about how they even presented it to us. And it was very strengths-based.

I think me having to look at the purple book and understand what the domains are and understand what the standard has helped me when I'm looking through their casework to see what I can understand about their level of work based on the documentation. It helps

me try to lift them a little bit. I can try to coach them towards better working areas when I see that they may be lacking. So it's helped me take a different perspective when I kind of do my supervisor role.

Familiarity with the QSR process helped alleviate anxiety, too.

[After participating in reviewer training prior to her own case's review] I knew that she was not going to trash us or anything like that!

[Recommendations for colleagues experiencing QSR for the first time] There's nothing to be afraid of [laughing]...relax and just, you know, take the feedback with a grain of salt because at the end of the day you know, as a worker and with your supervisor, you know the work that you're doing and I guess you kind of already know the areas that you need to work on so...enjoy the experience, take the feedback and apply it if you can. It's just meant to help you be the best worker that you can be.

Perceived feasibility of next steps. Being the best worker you can be, for many workers, is related to circumstances within their practice environment in addition to the work that they can directly control. Circumstances related to the practice environment, including the involvement of multiple systems in supporting child welfare practice, will be explored in Chapter 5, but here these circumstances have a more direct relationship to how workers perceive they can take the feedback and move forward with it. Next steps, to be meaningful, needed to feel relevant to the everyday practice context the workers experienced. Many participants had discussed looking closely at their cases during QSR preparation and already having an idea of what the areas for improvement were in a case. Often, however, feedback discussions about next steps included these as well as new information for the worker. The range of responses of workers to the feasibility of next steps ranged from very optimistic, to feeling like they did see opportunities to make changes in their specific practice that would better address a challenge rooted in the larger practice context, to feeling helpless in the face of impossible job demands.

Workers reporting positive feelings after their feedback described situations where they heard the strengths about their case in feedback, received next steps they felt were meaningful to the case, and that they had learned something they had not thought of before.

There's a couple other things that they had suggested, so I mean I walked away with being really excited about new ideas and feeling validated and doing a good job but also being excited about how I could do it better, if that makes sense.

[in response to my follow-up question about seeing results from feedback] You know, I think I have!...just being able to get them to be even open to having a working relationship with me, I think that's the first step.

Some workers described their next steps as difficult to implement but relevant to practice in their area. Respondents discussed their feelings about the cases and the way that influenced their perception of the feasibility of the feedback. In these cases, some of the feedback about the case was disappointing to workers, but despite that disappointment respondents could cite examples in their practice where the changes they make produced positive results in their practice.

I think [the recommendations] are difficult because they are things that everybody struggles with, and I think that one of the hardest things is that you know, when our personal opinions get in the way. Knowing how to talk to, it's not easy to engage a noncustodial parent when the custodial parent is saying "they've never even met my kid, I don't want them to have anything to do with my child" so I mean, I think that kind of tugs on people's personal opinions of what we should or shouldn't do.

[Does what happened after feedback make sense to you?] It definitely does. I think that's just because I think what came out of it, the engagement of noncustodial parents I think it's something that everyone struggles with. I think that there are things that we can do to make it better but I'm not sure that it's ever going to be, you know, perfect...but even so, we can still make it better than it was.

One worker, whose interview was not recorded, grew teary in the interview as she discussed the feedback she received from her QSR. The feedback itself about her case was positive, and she also described elements of case practice and supervision that she thought represented best practices in her county. But, the positive feedback from QSR did not balance out the overarching feelings about her job. She described how the work could not be done, because there were onerous requirements for documentation. This, in combination with the size of their caseloads and the family-centered practice model that requires spending a lot of time with families and child and family team members, made it impossible. She said, "reviewers

didn't get it" – in this instance, the misalignment was not in the facts of the case itself but in the ability to implement family-centered best practice effectively in her practice environment. Another, from a different site, referred to the QSR process as "borderline abusive" for this reason, that there is so much pressure to do well as practitioners and then to have to prove it through the QSR that workers leave the agency.

In one site, the feasibility of next steps suggested did not resonate with the workers who interpreted the reviewers' feedback as being based in policies and services that were not offered in their state. One participant had two very different experiences with feedback, one positive and one negative based upon the degree of familiarity that the reviewers had with policies and practice in her area.

I felt like people without any knowledge of our case histories, our amount of cases, our job duties were like, "why can't you do that?" And you know, that's not our job to call [parents] every day and remind them and go pick them up and make sure they go to these things and do everything for them...I almost got up and walked out because I got so angry and upset because they were questioning me and telling me to do things that weren't even feasible to do or did not even make sense and didn't have anything to do with permanency and safety of the kid.

On the next case, however, her description of feedback was much more positive and elicited smiles and laughter in our conversation:

Much more positive experience. I had actual social workers who had done the job before that said, "why don't you try this?" and engaged and asked questions. I didn't feel attacked at all...the second one was totally different and very helpful and I could've probably stayed in the room and talked to them for like 2 hours! [laughing] But it was much better and I feel like really it was only because they had child welfare knowledge. One person had worked in [the state].

This worker did translate the disappointing feedback into action, and did see evidence of positive change in her subsequent casework even though it required her to shift thinking about policy requirements from representing a maximum standard of effort to a minimum standard:

I was almost offended by them saying that I didn't engage fathers because I really felt like, that is something that I try to engage with everyone...so I did, we have to write goals here for us for the year and that was my goal for the last couple of years, trying to be more conscious of trying to find fathers, engage fathers, do more, not just, I felt like maybe I just need to take another step. You know, going to the jail and interviewing them, and going through that. Now I'm trying to do a little bit more with that and....I have a little cheat sheet that I use when I interview people and I've made some accommodations and added some things as part of that just to get more information and follow up. To try to do more to engage fathers and things like that. So I have tried to be a little more conscious of that and not just do the very minimum of what we have to do for our policy. I've added on there, education and what they did [occupation]. And I've noticed since I've done that that's opened up a little more line of communication. Just recently I interviewed somebody and I said, "Hey, how far did you go in school? What happened?" and that led her to tell me stories about how after she graduated from college she joined [a volunteer program] that sent her to another state without any family or friends or support, she met a guy...he was abusive...it was crazy to me just asking that one question led to a whole opening of new information that may not have come out when I'd just asked "are you married?" "who is your kid's dad?"...the policy questions. [T]hat's been a positive experience, just with changing and thinking about some of the things they said and doing things a little differently.

It is apparent from this example that this worker also developed "soft" practice skills, including engaging while interviewing, as well as a tangible work aid.

Practice improvement and case failure. In the state with the longest experience implementing QSR, cases could "fail," essentially meaning that a majority of the indicators – or only Safety – were scored in the range below acceptable practice. One administrator explained:

You have to meet a certain standard at 70% as a region. And if one case fails, if too many cases fail, we go below that, it really causes a lot of change in the region. Ok, boy, we failed Teaming as a region, so what do we need to do to ensure we're teaming better. So it can actually create a lot of change in terms of how we do work overall as a region.

When cases fail, the worker faces additional scrutiny over their casework. Cases that fail because of safety reasons are particularly frustrating for workers when the circumstance that led to the safety failure, such as a child running away or experiencing suicidal thoughts, are outside the direct control of the worker. Because of the extra scrutiny, and the implied question of whether or not the worker could have prevented the unsafe situation, this level of "failure" elicits intense feelings and reactions to the QSR process. When regions fail, that is, the scores on a

particular indicator are below 70% region-wide, it does have an impact on the morale in that region as well and there is additional scrutiny on the region and their performance improvement plans. One worker noted, though, that although the administrators try to minimize the sense that the responsibility falls on the worker, because the QSR is a systemic review, that sense of failure is still palpable to the workers. While the regional failure may be a “big black mark” to the regional administrators, “all the pressure’s on the caseworker.”

When a case “fails,” one of the first things we do is look at “is this, is this something the worker wasn’t doing?” And if so, that gives us a measure of, you know, how that workers doing overall, and is their casework meeting the standards that we need...with the worker, it can have a pretty devastating effect. It’s really a morale-buster, and what it does is, it does often result in us scrutinizing the rest of their cases to see what went wrong. And, and this is an okay thing but it’s not always an okay thing for a worker. But from an administrative point of view and for keeping children safe and families together, it’s very necessary for us to do that but it can seem pretty punitive to the worker when they don’t pass.

Descriptive Theme 3: QSR and Best Practice Standards

The QSR is designed to reflect evaluation of outcomes of family-centered best practice principles. States that have implemented practice reform develop their practice models. These models all represent themes of best practice, including engagement and teamwork, for example. The specific format of these practice models differs from state to state, as does the emphasis on which indicators can best be used to evaluate their practice model. Quality Service Review protocols and tools may be personalized to these elements based on state preferences to most directly reflect that state’s practice model. As the above section indicates, the process of implementing a QSR review and the feedback it produces for the workers and agency can have a significant impact on the way workers, supervisors, and administrators perceive their work. For this reason, it is important that the QSR reflect the best practice that states hope to produce in their child welfare system. The ideal situation was represented by one respondent, who stated, “we believe in what QSR is reviewing. We’re doing that process and we’re at the indicators that

are being explored and looked at, they're best practice for any case." Just as QSR influences practice by identifying opportunities to improve practice in individual cases and on broader systemic levels, participants also discussed instances in their QSR process that illuminated areas within practice models themselves that could be more clearly defined and consistently understood. Several participants referred to QSR as a training, supporting the concept of QSR serving as an important learning tool.

In states with well-developed practice models, QSR serves to operationalize best practice principles into case outcomes. Respondents from the state that has been using QSR the longest, and in which it was originally tied to exit criteria for a settlement agreement with the state child welfare agency, talked about the importance of the QSR's consistency with the practice model. In this instance, feasibility of changes to practice after feedback related less to policies and resource availability than to ensuring that the QSR was guiding practice consistently with the agency's practice model. There were several examples of workers and supervisors taking information from a review of one case and applying it to other cases, underscoring the importance of this consistency as the QSR feedback on one case has a ripple effect throughout other cases.

Incorporate what you've done in that case into another one if you get another one that's kind of like it...and then like, you know on team meetings you're able to write a better team meeting note because you know what they're looking for and you try to make it easy for them to find what they need so that they can get their job done too, to review the case.

Just having set a standard...I find workers in this field, maybe it's the newer workers, they want a checklist. They want to know what you are talking about when you say a good quality of social work. I think the QSR has set a standard of what is acceptable and what is unacceptable and that's easier for workers to understand, I think, and so that's helped bring some of those core areas up.

A checklist was more of a "did I do a team meeting?" yes. "Did I do a plan afterward?" yes. Did I call and make sure that collateral people were involved?" yes. "Did I make

sure the family had resources to make the changes that I needed?" yes. Whereas the bigger picture wasn't that I had a team meeting, it was, who was at the team meeting, were those appropriate people at that team meeting, do we, are we looking at not only the underlying issues of this family to help them be successful are we then wrapping around them those resources and help, to help them be successful.

Another comment spoke to the challenge of shifting the focus from being specific to child safety to the family-centered model, which places child safety at the center of decision-making but emphasizes family functioning as the path to achieving long-term child safety. This is been a significant, and for some, not intuitive shift in orientation. The QSR reviews that respondents discussed identified more frequent contact between children and noncustodial and incarcerated parents, for instance, as an opportunity for improvement. This requires a shift from the perspective that it does more harm than good to children to have contact with parents while they are in jail, for instance. Another example of the way QSR can capture a disconnect between one workers' casework and family-centered practice was offered by a supervisor:

I think one of the more important things that help us assess how to really measure how we're doing as workers is a couple of things...how we're engaging our families and pulling them into the very difficult process of working with our agency, which is very scary and frightening and foreign...It seems like the families that, I hate to say that maybe don't succeed, sometimes - not always - but sometimes you will see that they have a caseworker who just was only child-focused and not family-focused. And that's just not going to work.

One supervisor mentioned that having the QSR protocol in hand was useful in mitigating the effects of turnover on her team's understanding and consistent application of best practice:

I think the biggest factor is turnover. This is a field that's tough, you get a lot of new workers that only stay 1-3 years....You get new workers in this field, the turnover's high, so workers that have never been through a QSR are understanding what the scores are and what the reviewers are looking for so that they are trying to implement that in their cases all the time.

In a site that was newly implementing practice model reforms, workers spoke to the numerous initiatives and changes in practice policies and data collection as strategies to meet compliance standards for settlement agreements and to support reform. The amount of time

spent entering data into the computer was significant, and a contributing factor to a teary explanation that doing everything that was expected with the caseloads in their state was impossible. A different participant offered the following thought about the relationship between QSR and the importance of the balance between what the agency measures and its significance to practice reform.

Well, meaningful reform in child welfare is only going to come from accurate data. So there needs to be a focus on data and the product of our process, so I think that there does need to be an effort to look at what works and why. And the more we look at that, the more we'll find that there's not a one size fits all solution. So we need to get back to having more resources and more approaches um, and see what, where the data takes us.

The QSR revealed opportunities to more clearly define best practice principles in the context of certain situations encountered in casework for the public child welfare agency and practice partners. An overarching theme that will be discussed in Chapter 5 is the importance of multiple systems involved in child welfare practice. Examples where QSR revealed these dynamics involved foster parents, noncustodial parents, and other agency administrative priorities. One participant noted that one thing learned through QSR is that is really important to have foster parents “on board” with the reunification plan, because if they are truly not invested in reunifying their foster child with their birth parents they can discredit rather than support the biological family. Two states struggled with engaging noncustodial parents, and participants expressed confusion about what that engagement is supposed to look like. There have been federal initiatives put in place that link funding to noncustodial parent involvement through the CFSR; however, the family-specific context was not clearly linked to the purpose of involving noncustodial and incarcerated parents or to what degree of involvement in case planning represented acceptable Engagement.

My case in particular was kind of difficult I think because the dad was not involved and he didn't want to be involved. So as far as his cooperation with me and the team, I don't

really think that it changed. His feedback was just, complaining the whole time about the agency being corrupt.

Mom was in and out of jail, very young, had lots of problems, drug history, and she had already placed her child with her parents. So I had reported once the guardianship is finalized, the kid is with his grandparents he will have some stability, I will be closing my case. And the [reviewer] was so angry with me for closing my case, and I said, “you know I have 17 other cases that I need to worry about.” And she’s like, “well how are you going to help her get her GED and get her driver’s license?” [goals included on the case plan] and I’m like, “I can’t” but I’ve provided her with all the information.

Another thing we’re working on too is engaging incarcerated parents. And I think that’s something that’s hard not in the least because it’s hard to convince our caseworkers that it’s important but also like other people in the community as well.

I believe overall as far as with my case, there was some things that I, was really out of my control like the parent, one parent was in [a distant state]. So I really couldn’t engage him too much. Now that is an area, engaging parents that we did poorly in as an agency so now we’re getting training on that...a lot of times there are barriers like distance, people us not cooperating with getting us things that the other parent is, so we’re trying to learn how to...engage the noncustodial parents earlier in the case and have them involved more.

Participants also discussed a benefit of QSR in their state as helping provide specific case examples of best practice in action, and provide a consistent standard to work toward even though the concepts of “engagement” and “teamwork” themselves are abstract. Stability was identified as an indicator that did not appear to be consistently applied, to one participant, based on different results between the CFSR, which indicated their state was doing well, and QSR, which was less positive. One example shows how the QSR focuses on quality of those indicators, rather than case circumstances, and the participant who shared it uses it as an example for her team:

If you just looked at his current situation it wasn’t scoring well in Permanency, Stability, because you had a 16, 17 year-old kid running, doing all those things those kids do. So, I know administration was worried that it wasn’t going to pass because he just was unstable. But...it came out positively and so I use it as a learning example for my workers. When they reviewed the case they found a solid team, a solid relationship with the child, he felt involved, he felt like he had a say somewhat in his case, the team felt like we worked well together and that when something happened we addressed it, like all

the things you want to see in a QSR case were happening on many of the levels and it was able to score the case successful. I try to use it to my team to say just because there's aspects of a case that aren't going well, because that's normal, if you're doing good quality casework the underlying stuff, engaging, teaming, writing good plans, partnering with the courts, if you're doing that on a solid basis some of the inconsistent things that happen like kids running, you can still score well. More importantly you're still doing good work and you're still hopefully having successful outcomes even though it can be rickety all the way along. Don't give up hope just because this part is bad right now.

Descriptive Theme 4: Comparisons between QSR and Quantitative Reviews

QSR is an important source of data regarding on-the-ground practice. By measuring these practice outcomes, it establishes the on-the-ground practice as a priority for the agency.

Participants from one state all discussed their state's emphasis on entering data into their computer system, and its efforts to define itself as a data-driven agency. Participants did not describe visible results of this quantitative data collection yet, however, the benefits of quantifying QSR case review indicators was noted because it gives agencies the ability to compare case to case, area to area, and year to year. A participant from a different state further along in their practice model reforms described the initial skepticism about the quantitative numbers, noting,

We want to do casework that's best for the child and the family, so sometimes when you put it in just really black and white analytical, data-type stuff, people back off and go "wait, this is a person type of job! We shouldn't have to work just to make sure we get good numbers." But, we kind of do, and some people don't like the idea of the QSR being the best way, we really should be working cases just by looking at those indicators.

Just because it sounds too number-like. I don't really know another way of putting it. We are working with a bunch of social workers here, so, sometimes data freaks us out a little bit! [laughing]

You're quantifying what you do. And people can do that, you know? How awesome is it that you can take and see, this is factual information to see is it working or isn't it working...I mean, they [the state government] change everything like they change your socks, and so it's like let's quantify something, let's give them facts, so we can make decisions that work, not because it's the flavor of the month.

Workers talked about the quantitative audit-type reviews in contrast to the QSR. For her, the quantitative reviews were brief but broad and had large consequences; the QSR was time consuming but covered just one case and there were no negative consequences associated with a poor score.

The QSR was definitely more detailed as far as the specific cases that they looked at, whereas like a performance review obviously there's kind of a general, overall kind of feedback so the QSR was good [pause] in like, looking specifically at one case...when we have our annual inspection, it's all about what paperwork did we miss, like, what do we need to do next year, and it's a penalty system because we get cites and if we have too many cites then we get a provisional license. So it's a very negative motivator so we don't get those cites.

This same worker summed up her perspective about the contrast in review methods and the effect this has on families:

It wasn't focused on the paperwork and the deadlines. And did I do everything that I needed to do to a T, it was more the quality of what I was doing. How am I talking to mom and dad, how am I being engaging, what do my lifestyle checks look like whenever I'm at the house. And I think that's like when it comes to casework and getting families engaged, that's the most important thing, the families aren't going to care if I got my letter out on time to them, they're going to care, well, how do I treat them whenever I am in their home.

Participants also discussed the process of evaluation, offering recommendations to make future QSRs most meaningful to direct practice staff, and making comparisons between the kind of learning that occurs after a QSR review and after a more quantitatively-oriented performance review.

Descriptive Theme 5: Recommendations for Future QSR

Participants described the investment into the QSR as substantial, but meaningful in most cases. The discussions about the QSR process were contemplative and elicited emotion, in some cases. Child welfare workers are, by reputation, an intrepid group, tackling complex challenges and substantial caseloads. Their recommendations to strengthen the QSR process reflect their

deep commitment to providing the highest level of practice they can, and their willingness to delve even further into evaluation and scrutiny, that is, meaningful scrutiny, to do so.

Participants shared their thoughts about the limits of the QSR process, and what a qualitative review process would have to look like to fully measure their practice. These suggestions expanded the parts of the QSR process they felt had worked well, like the interviews with family members and other participants in the case. More than one worker felt the review would have been more beneficial if the QSR reviewers could observe them as they did their casework, actually going on home visits with workers and going to court. Participants generally desired more feedback about family interactions, on more than one case and based on more than one interview with a family.

I think it would have to take multiple different interviews and at different times. I think it would, they would have to be part of it with us during our case and do unannounced visits...they would have to put more time into it. Go to our court hearings when we go to court.

I think if the QSR people had actually had the time to be in our office and have the time to see what is going on here that we strike a very good balance of working with families, engaging our families and community, and doing our best to help them and doing the data entry which is our primary responsibility.

Some suggestions were about sampling.

If I was going to change anything, I wish it could be more comprehensive. Like, I wish they would be able to get a larger sample size to really see what I do as a caseworker.

I mean it's a huge cost to [bring] people in, and all the hours that are spent and everything...it would be nice to have, okay if 20 cases were selected, pick the 5 toughest cases in the building and have those automatically be drawn in...to be able to brainstorm with people who are even more removed from it, you know what I mean?

Another saw potential for ongoing case support from the QSR reviewers.

It would be nice to like, have a follow up mid-time. You know the QSR process is so long, and then you wait and then you do it over again in a year. It would almost be cool to have a follow up in the middle of it with the people who evaluated that case Like, even if it was just a phone call or an email or some type of like, "we made these goals when we left and brought these suggestions, what did you do with them?"...if they were to go back

on the same cases and look, what was the outcome of our recommendations, that would be cool.

Participants suggested that reviewers primarily responsible for giving feedback should have recent child welfare experience. This reflects the theme about feedback being most useful when the follow up steps seem feasible in the practice context the workers experienced. Facilitating participation by workers, so that workers could shadow on a case both as a learning opportunity for them but also to share ideas about practice improvement in the local context across the state.

I think the best way, I think it really helped to have one person that had done the job before, and that meaning she was like an older woman with a lot of experience.

I don't know if it can be mandatory, but like I said it really impacted me personally when I went out and did reviews...I just think every worker should have to go through it as a reviewer because you just take on a different perspective. I think that might help a lot of them.

First I think people who do the QSR should only be people who had to go through the process themselves...I'm totally about like, you should not tell other people what to do unless you've done it yourself. And I'm not talking about like 50 years ago, like nothing annoys me more than somebody telling me something about my job that did foster care 20 years ago. Like, I don't care. I did foster care 20 years ago. It doesn't matter, it's completely different now...unless you're out in the field and you know what's going on, I feel like that's really important, you have to know.

Since participants saw feedback as being feasible only in context of resources (both in time, service availability, and in family capacity for change), and since the QSR is supposed to be a systemic review, then states should be prepared to make adjustments to facilitate the conditions that support best practice. One participant wondered why the review process had to be statewide and so intense, noting that if supervisors and administrators were doing their job throughout the year the themes of case practice and opportunities for system improvement should be evident too.

Supervisors and administrators who had also participated as reviewers in the QSR process had advice for new adopters of QSR to keep the emphasis on consistent practice.

When we started in this state they looked at it as a once-a-year review...and it was thing big to-do. I mean they would put on a potluck, they would buy all this food...and then move on and we never thought about it again. And that was not successful and I didn't like that way. I think I would tell a state "don't treat it as a review, treat it as our practice"...that would be my biggest recommendation, because if you just look at it as a review, anybody will just say, you know, that's just one time if I just get through this it'll be fine. I don't think it changes the culture or the practice if you look at it that way.

This chapter summarized the initial descriptive codes and main descriptive themes emerging from the study analysis. It also provided findings addressing the primary research questions. Five primary descriptive themes emerged. Participants perceived that they invested a great deal of time and effort into a QSR, and the direct practice staff felt the return on this investment. Participants felt that the QSR served a functional role as a practice intervention explicitly, through feedback and training, as well as implicitly, by encouraging necessary changes in casework before the review and in providing a venue for families and other team members to talk about their case, influencing case dynamics. Additionally, the QSR highlighted for participants areas for practice improvement as well as areas where best practice standards could be more clearly operationalized to the benefit of families served by the child welfare system. These five themes address the descriptive questions asked of direct practice workers about experiencing QSR. In the course of these conversations, workers described their practice environment as they sought to provide context to their answers about QSR. These themes, that describe the practice environment more directly, are discussed in the following chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONNECTING DESCRIPTIVE THEMES TO THE PRACTICE ENVIRONMENT

In addition to the descriptive themes that directly respond to the research questions, other themes emerged that give context to the practice context in which the QSR was conducted. These underlying themes relate to the context of the practice environment, and will be discussed in this chapter. These major themes are workers' emotional investment in their practice, front-line perceptions of the external forces and multiple systems involved in child welfare practice, and perceptions of the changing nature of the child welfare system.

Workers are Emotionally Invested in Practice

Participants used words that described their feelings about practice, their jobs, and the evaluation processes used to assess the quality of their work. Notably, caseworkers were more demonstrative in their emotions than interviewees who were supervisors or administrators, and body language ranged from wide-eyed, arm waving excitement to tears of frustration to sharp, pointed tones to underscore angry feelings. I suspect, but cannot conclude, that this is the result of them feeling as much or more pressure to achieve good outcomes as supervisors and administrators do. They also are regularly face to face with the people on their caseload, getting excited when things go well and frustrated or saddened when they do not. The intensity of child welfare case practice may require a worker to “fire on all cylinders” to achieve good performance, that is, intellectual effort is necessary to assess complex needs of families and identify strengths to use in planning services to meet them. Emotional information may be a good source of information about practice. In one example, a worker who had a very strong

emotional reaction to the feedback about a case gave a very clear example of how her practice changed for the better after QSR feedback. From a supervisory point of view, this emotional investment can be interpreted as evidence someone is a good worker. These descriptions were implicitly normative, that a good worker is conscientious and perhaps a little perfectionistic – sensitive, yet plucky. Supervisors also talked about their own sensitivity to workers’ emotional investment, and their attempts to manage it. Opportunities for supervisors to tend to the emotions among their staff presented in QSR during all parts of review preparation, implementation, and follow up, and even in the framing of the evaluation itself.

This is where I think we’re trying to make a change in the region as well...we have our workers working their little hearts out all year long. You know, they’re overworked, underpaid, QSR is very stressful.

Any good worker personalizes and internalizes somewhat when you have bad things that happen on a case, or you’re reviewed or you know, you get feedback so, I think to some extent everybody still worries about it.

We’re always very nervous when people come because a lot of social workers believe it’s their job to find fault and if you have a whole field of flowers and you find one weed, then the whole thing is bad.

One worker shared that the supervisors in her office, and the positive feedback received from community partners and QSR reviewers about their practice changes, helped her manage the emotionally draining context of her job:

And even though some days, even like today I’m pulling my hair out and think “oh my gosh, I don’t know how much longer I can do foster care” because I’ve had some really tough weeks recently. Um, and the secondary trauma feels stronger right now than it has in a long time. But I go back to the fact of “oh my gosh I wouldn’t have made it a year if it wasn’t for being where I am.”

Risk emerged as a component of emotional practice and a concern for participants. This too evokes worry and fear for children’s safety. One worker described the computer system’s overdue alerts that pop up when they open their program every morning as “red and angry.”

Fear of liability was noted as an influence guiding practice from central administration policies and in the way court systems manage custodial cases. On a practical level, concern about workload and caseload also influence perceptions of risk. One worker noted that with large caseloads, you have to triage your cases and organize them based on level of risk. Since QSR pulls cases randomly, this can mean that preparation activities for a QSR pulls attention away from a more “critical” situation, depending on which case on the workers’ caseload was selected. This concern elevates the importance of evaluation as a practice improvement tool to a critical one germane to the agency’s understanding of risks to their families and how well the agency is managing that risk.

That, one of the realities of working in the neglect/abuse field is there’s a big risk leaving a child in the home. It’s easier to take a child out of the home than it is to put a child back. Because now when a child is removed from the home, then now the risk to the child is a liability for us. So if you return a child home and something bad happens to that child then we all believe that we are now responsible and um, sometimes the worker is, has more liability than the parent. So working through that risk involves teamwork and we do get a lot more teamwork from our supervisors here and management as we work through these cases.

One worker, from the same state, offered the following observation about risk management using the child and family team model that QSR measures. For her, the model of practice helps to mitigate the risk of liability and the concern that accompanies a challenging decision.

You’re making more calculated risks for families but you’re bringing more people to the table to make decisions. So it’s not me lowly old caseworker feeling this burden of these huge decisions.

These feelings and emotional responses related to the workers’ sense of what they had direct influence or ability to control in their casework. This influenced feelings about their job, about themselves, and their ability to help families make changes. Two workers discussed this in detail, with one noting that “at the end of the day” she feels responsible for everything, even

though there are many barriers to even completing the basic data entry and case management tasks on the workload. She tearfully noted that providing the best possible services to families is impossible. The other very pointedly said that the QSR process was taken much too far by administration and supervisors who went over and over things with a worker during preparation for the review, far beyond the point this worker felt could make any difference in the case and succeeding only in keeping the workers under pressure. This worker offered suggestions to improve this part of the evaluation process without eliminating QSR, but did comment that she had been asked to participate as a reviewer and declined because she felt it was a “borderline abusive” process to workers.

To a worker who felt QSR was a positive experience, there was a direct connection between her emotional investment in the case and the importance of QSR for evaluating practice.

I’ve been working with this family for 16 months now, I think? It is almost a year and a half and so, I think it’s fair to say that my perspective - I’m less objective with this family than I was 16 months ago and that’s just natural. There’s no way to avoid that, because I built a relationship with these kids. I built a relationship with the family, even the extended family. I’ve had arguments and cries and whatever with Mom, and I watched Mom go through her divorce and Dad go to prison and, you know, I felt those things. Even though it wasn’t my family and it’s not directly impacting me - it is secondarily directing and impacting me - but there’s no way for me to look at it the way I looked at it when I got the case and saw it on paper. That’s done once you get the case and start to work on it. So for somebody to be able to come out and read and dig into it that has no vested interest, and to tell you what they see and to validate your feelings, to me is huge. Because that tells me I’m either on the right track or I’m not on the right track, and that could that could save those kids six months of being in care longer, or going home again, or not seeing their mom ever again. And those are lives. I mean we’re talking about little kids’ lives are forever going to be changed by decisions we make....That new perspective, that new look and it’s something they don’t know anything about, is powerful.

Perceptions of External Pressures and the Multiple Systems in Child Welfare

Study participants were deeply affected by the multiple systems, including education, healthcare, mental health, law enforcement and courts, which have a direct relationship to families that are involved in the child welfare system by providing services and resources. The service array, in particular the quality of services within that array, can vary widely from place to place. One state in this study demonstrated this clearly, as a worker noted that in the rural area where her office was located, hour long drives to providers were common and this came as a surprise to her urban colleagues. When caseloads are large, this amount of driving has a major impact on the activities a worker can do during a day. The underlying challenge appears to be that these other systems are complex and multilayered themselves; they have their own desired outcomes and evaluation processes, and their own external pressures for improvement. As much as these outside systems influence the child welfare system, they are not accountable for the outcomes produced in child welfare. Quantitative file reviews do not always capture this influence, but the systemic nature of the QSR is intended to provide insight into the relationships between these systems. In these interviews, some of the systemic challenges that emerged related to these external influences, and that they do not necessarily understand or endorse family-centered practice, nor the challenge in producing lasting change in individuals.

We do have people who think that every parent will benefit from a service. They come at this thinking, well there's something happening in this parent's life and if we say a magic word or give them a magic pill that they'll parent just like I do. And that's simply not true. People are who they are and we have to accept them as they are.

In the agencies newer to implementing family-centered practice, the great initiative being undertaken in child welfare systems was not a priority for other agencies, but perhaps there was hope that it would be. As one worker described it, effecting practice model change and adopting a family-centered focus throughout the wider system was like turning a huge ship around in a

lake, not like maneuvering a little speed boat. This is particularly challenging when systems like jail and mental health and court systems are necessary to support the work of child welfare agencies.

I think having someone else come in and talk to the families instead of them, to try to help them understand what our process is because I think that's part of the issue, is that families and communities don't really understand what we do. They either think that we take kids when we shouldn't take kids, or that we don't take kids when they should be taken, so I don't know. So I think something that would help educate the community might be beneficial.

Another thing that we're working on too is like engaging incarcerated parents. And I think that that, that's something that's hard not in the least because it's hard to convince our caseworkers that it's important but also like other people in the community as well.

It's a community effort, so it's not just DHS sitting over there doing everything, it's working with community mental health, it's working with the schools...For instance, like, I'm being taught, um, I'm being trained as a trainer for parent resiliency training right now, and um, so like even utilizing like the concept of trauma to our schools is, was pretty foreign.

For one worker, the "external" influence came from within the agency, observing that there was a disconnect between central office priorities for collecting data and the field level offices priority of spending time with families – even though both priorities have the intended purpose of supporting agency improvement. Another expressed skepticism that family-centered practice reform could be successful without additional investment from stakeholders and state government support. This worker observed the neoliberal movement towards accountability and efficiency, and saw it manifesting in the agency's conflicting priorities for workers.

You go back to, you know, the system's need for data. Someone's got to enter data, so now there is a lot more data that needs to be entered, and there's no new people to enter it. So the old people have to enter all the data. So when QSR came, they said well, now you've got to change your focus from entering data to going out and working with families. But our system is data-driven, and the priority is entering the data. So, there's not been a shift, and I mean there is, all states all around this country are experiencing budget cuts. No one runs [for political office] on increasing welfare spending, no one runs on hiring more state workers and hiring more people to enter data so that other

people can go out and work with families. So until that is resolved, I don't think that there will really be a true commitment to this kind of thing, to QSR.

A frequently overlooked procedural reality of case practice is that custodial decisions and the level of department involvement with a family is ultimately decided in court. Although child welfare agencies coordinate services and present recommendations to the court, it is in fact judges' decisions in court that determine if a child is removed from their home, or returned to their home, or if parental rights are terminated, or even if the plan presented by the child welfare agency is approved based on legal standards. Participants discussed the increased teamwork with community partners and court staff in preparing for and participating in the QSR as an important positive attribute of the qualitative evaluation. One worker stated her belief that the QSR interview process should be asking the legal professionals involved in child welfare cases how they support the work being done by child welfare workers; in other words, not just legal professionals' thoughts about how well the child welfare worker is doing his or her job. Another task, then, facing child welfare agencies is educating court staff about each system's practice model, priorities, and information that drives decision-making.

We've had to do a lot of work with our, our attorneys and our courts to educate them on this assessment tool as well. Not that judges don't think that they don't get a say and that they can't throw in stuff they want, obviously any court orders have to go in the plan, but we try to guide them using this tool now. So, we've had to do a lot of work with our attorneys and like I said our judicial folks.

Workers also discussed the frequent changes in the personnel in these partnerships. Turnover is a constant challenge for direct service in child welfare and other human serving fields, and in this context the effect of being "set back" and having to begin educating and training new partners again, while the opportunity cost is lost time spent partnering with experienced and effective partners.

That's hard, because there's lots of people that like, between me and you, like sometimes our judge doesn't buy into that. And he's leaving and now we're getting a new judge, you know, you think you've got the community, you think you're good to go and then things change.

A lot of times advocates and advocacy groups make trouble for a short while and then when the problems persist they leave. And all they've done is set us backwards.

Despite the description of QSR's involvement of multiple partners during the review processes, participants did not identify a similar level of increased teamwork and understanding at the highest levels of decision-making across systems. This is an ongoing challenge, and one that also echoes the sense of distance between direct field staff and the people in positions to support their work at a policy-based level.

[sigh] We have a pretty good relationship with service providers. I think that one of our biggest issues right now is [inauguration of new local government officials] who don't really understand what we do. So I think that is something that the QSR didn't really help because it didn't understand to begin with...and because [the officials] are new, they don't really understand what we do. So it's hard to explain, when someone doesn't agree with something we did, why we did or didn't, the way we did.

Another participant from this state suggested that a process of having outsiders come in to educate the community rather than the agency doing it themselves might be helpful in addressing this disconnect among systems.

I think having someone else come in and talk to the families instead of [agency staff]...I think that's part of the issue, is that families and communities don't really understand what we do. They either think that we take kids when we shouldn't take kids, or that we don't take kids when they should be taken, so I don't know. I think something that would help educate the community might be beneficial.

Perceptions of the Changing Nature of Child Welfare Work

A defining characteristic of a complex system is that it never achieves a steady state, that constant change means the system must perform as best as it can while operating at the "edge of chaos," requiring perpetual adjustment. Constant changes in caseworkers and administrators within and outside the agency influence the practice environment. The families that a worker has

on a caseload change and turn over, and each family has unique needs so the service array that a worker uses is also changing frequently. Child welfare practice too is changing, with a shift from child-centered to family-centered practice. Not only do the processes used to evaluate practice change, but the quality of the QSR reviews themselves change over time too. An important element of evaluation is that it is critical that the QSR, or any evaluation tool, is that it is able to capture the desired results for families. From the state that has implemented QSR for the longest time among the three here, a comment on the QSR process was that it was “fluid” and that the quality of the QSR tool is still developing, as the department works to define that best practice standard consistently. This is a grim forecast for agencies striving for consistency. On a merry-go-round, your view of the outside is constantly changing but while on the ride, you are stationary. One worker analogized continuous practice improvement efforts not as a merry-go-round, but as a game of “whack-a-mole:”

It’s almost more reactive than proactive often, because we might have thought we were doing really well with our plans, and our plans were looking great but then they just get hammered at the end of the day after the QSR. So then we spend the next year beefing up our plans, and working with our workers to make sure they’re writing plans appropriately, involving the family, and so then they look super great on the next QSR but then all of a sudden our teaming has gone by the wayside a little bit. So then we react to that. So I sometimes feel like we’re chasing. It’s hard to keep all the balls in the air at any given time and I’m not sure why but it just is.

There are no obvious responses to that worker’s statement, as it is hard to understand why keeping all the balls in the air is so difficult – especially when, theoretically, all the balls in the air should complement each other. However, there are many moving parts in child welfare systems. The final overarching theme about the context of the practice environment is about the changing nature of the actual tasks that make up “casework” and how these – like the choice to use QSR as an evaluation tool – reflect the agency priorities.

I just remember how when we first heard about the QSR, everyone just kind of, like the mood just kind of dropped. Because it was just one more thing that we have to do. But as we were preparing for the QSR and as that time drew closer it was kind of it was more of like an excitement, like somebody is finally going to be looking at how we do our work, read it, and the end result of the paperwork. And then when it was over it was all very positive, it was just a positive atmosphere. We're looking forward to doing it again as an agency so it was just funny to see that shift from a very negative viewpoint to a very positive one at the end of it.

Time is a finite resource, and workers must choose how to spend their time in casework.

Casework activities have changed as technology has introduced computers into the child welfare system, laws and policies direct activities and these have changes with the shift from child-centered to family-centered practice. The effect on the daily activities that child welfare workers do emerged in the conversations about QSR. The central issue related to the competing priorities of entering data into the computer system and spending time with families. Newer workers experienced this shift in work priorities as a choice they make in the present each day, whereas veteran workers reflected upon this as an evolution occurring over time. Regardless of tenure, workers described the degree of documentation and the time it required as detracting from case practice rather than adding to quality of practice. One newer worker said:

I mean obviously there has to be timelines for things to get done, for investigations to be completed in order for our kids to find permanency, there has to be those deadlines. But I think, I think at this point in time, um, it has gotten, gotten to a point where it's unrealistic to be able to keep up with the amount of paperwork that we need to do and the quality of work that they want done. It's kind of at a point where we have to pick one or the other. Some workers pick that they want their paperwork to be in order and I can respect that. I am the type of person that I would rather build a relationship with my family and I would rather do the work in the field. And you know, if it comes inspection time and I get cites in my file but I have a working relationship with my family I'm okay with that. And I'm lucky because I work with an agency that understands that but I know that there are agencies that, like it's unacceptable to have, late deadlines. But, you know, I didn't come into this field to do paperwork. I came into this field to, you know, help families to be the best that they could be.

Workers with more experience in practice could point to changes that occurred over time.

Nearly all of the conversation had to do with workload and stretching resources related to data

entry and documentation. One worker related this to risk of worker safety, noting that sometimes workers can only visit families after dark, for example, when children and parents get home from work and school. If workers felt unsafe going to neighborhoods at night alone, they could go with another worker. Now, there are not enough staff with the workloads for this to happen. An opportunity is lost to share practice implementation strategies and skills across colleagues. In earlier sections, some participants considered feedback from colleagues who review as an advantage of the QSR because they can share suggestions and ideas within a shared practice context. Other veterans remarked on the increasing workload related to data entry requirements as well as the additional coordination among external child and family team members since the implementation of family-centered practice.

When I first came here I had 22 kids on my caseload and that was low. Like, people who would hear and would say “you are so lucky” and I’d be like, “you gotta be kidding.” But I remember when I worked private agency [17 years ago] and I had 40 on my case load...but I’m going to tell you what I work harder now having 12 on my caseload than I did when I had 22 on my caseload 5 years ago when I got here. Like, we don’t have late reports. We always make our visits.

The worker making the statement above ardently supported practice reform – the statement about her workload and working harder was, for her, a positive thing because she was seeing good things happen for the families on her caseload. Her statement speaks to the importance of having the time to spend with families and doing the face to face casework that is critical, in her view, for achieving desired results. The worker below, however, worked in an office where documentation in the computer system was the priority. Aggregated reports pulled from the system were the most frequent non-supervisory source of feedback about their performance. This worker saw a positive impact of the improvements in the agency’s knowledge of their resource availability as a result of new capacities built into their computer system. However, this worker ruefully talked about the ways this shift negatively impacted the

amount of time workers had available for families and doubted the sustainability of family-centered practice in the data-prioritizing workplace.

But when I started working here, 100 years ago, um, foster care workers that were sitting at their desks were seen as people who weren't doing their job because we spent all day, we were in foster homes, we were driving kids around, we were doing things with kids, we were working with parents, um, sitting in counseling with them, taking them places, watching them with their kids and doing all of those things. That's how we knew what was going on with the families. And so now, that has gone completely to the other side. Where when you walk through this agency you see all the workers sitting at their desks.

These three themes shed light on the underlying conditions of the child welfare practice environment that create challenges for child welfare workers. Caseload size, turnover, difficulty in producing change in difficult family circumstances, and the emotional nature of the job emerged as challenges within the practice environment in our discussions about QSR, but there are surprising nuances to the way these affect practice. Caseload size is not absolute, it is relative to the expectations of how time is balanced between administrative and practice duties as well as factors unique to the child and family teams within that caseload. The complexity of child and family needs are not absolute either, they are relative to the degree to which available resources – including time - fit that family's unique situation. Emotions are a constant presence in child welfare casework, but this is not surprising. Empathy with children and families experiencing difficult situations was an accepted reality of child welfare work, and this adds to the complexity of practice. However, the emotions that workers discussed as impacting their job the most were feelings of frustration and helplessness when expectations and resources coming from outside the case did not align with what seemed possible for caseworkers to accomplish within the case. It is accepted that child welfare workers are working with families with multiple, complex challenges that must produce a great deal of change to those circumstances. The challenge emerges from the reality that major change takes time to produce and is hard to

sustain. This may seem evident to workers who spend time with families, but the multiple systems that directly influence case practice include professionals and laypeople whose orientation towards family change is linear and behavioral. This can lead to unrealistic expectations that cause frustration for workers and the external partners alike, a situation requiring some management as well. Understanding these nuances may help inform the use of feedback that comes from QSR processes, its utility as an educational tool, and could perhaps inform additional strategies for evaluating practice and strengthening child welfare agencies' best practice strategies.

CHAPTER SIX - DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research was to explore the experiences of direct practice staff (case worker and supervisors) who have experienced a qualitative case review (QSR) in order to produce a comprehensive description of the way direct-practice child welfare staff perceive qualitative case review and the influence those reviews have on case practice. Individual interviews with fourteen public child welfare agency caseworkers and next-two level supervisors were conducted between July and November 2016. These participants represent systems in three states, each with different degrees of experience implementing family centered practice models and qualitative case reviews. The following research questions framed the semi-structured interviews and data analysis in this study:

1. How do child welfare workers and supervisors perceive the QSR process?
2. How do child welfare workers and supervisors perceive the relationship between the QSR process and best practice?
3. What do workers and supervisors see as beneficial/ineffective about the QSR as a learning process about best practice?
4. How do workers and supervisors describe the ways QSR participation influenced their casework, in a specific case or general manner?

In Chapter 4, major descriptive themes were discussed. The themes of time investment and that QSR is a practice intervention in addition to an evaluation informed Research Questions 1 and 4. Research question 2 was informed by descriptions of ways that the QSR process helped

to operationalize best practice principles and identify areas where the outcome of best practice may need to be more clearly defined. The ability of workers and agency staff to apply results from a specific case's QSR review to other cases helped address the Research Questions 3 and 4. Chapter 5 explored themes that emerged regarding the practice context that evaluation processes are intended to inform. Ultimately, these themes in combination suggest that qualitative case reviews provide different kinds of information than quantitative performance reviews do, but that conditions of the practice environment surrounding the QSR process influence how it is used for learning and how its lessons are applied in subsequent practice.

Limitations

The study is affected by several limitations, many related to the process of participant selection. Participant selection involved three steps: selection at the state, site, and participant level. At each of these steps, the sampling procedures posed some limitations to comprehensiveness of the description. At the state level, two states declined to participate because they had ceased using QSR, one permanently and one described itself as "taking a hiatus" from it. Thus, the three states that participated had either invested in it for decades and felt positive about that investment, or, were new to the process and very interested in learning more about QSR and how to mitigate the challenges they anticipated facing shortly as they implemented QSR over the longer term. Information from the states that had decided to stop using QSR or states who had implemented it long enough to encounter ongoing challenges with the process might have varied substantially from the information received from these three participating states.

Within states, sites were chosen based on their willingness to participate and because their state liaisons believed they would be a good source of data. Because of the reputational

sampling method, it is certainly likely that staff in the sites and states were aware of who might be approached to participate in the interviews. It is possible that state staff selected sites and people they knew to have experiences with QSR that were similar to theirs. None of the participants expressed this as a concern during discussion of confidentiality, and in one site the three participants all knew the others were participating.

In addition to attitudes about QSR, the element of time could also have influenced who participated. Workload came up as a dynamic that influenced both the perceptions of the QSR process and the child welfare practice environment, and it is possible that perceived time available was a factor when state staff considered potential participants. Likewise, potential participants themselves might have been unable to participate because of their workload. One interview had to be rescheduled because of an unanticipated event. Three scheduled interviews were never conducted, because of unanticipated events requiring the workers' attention, and they were not successfully rescheduled. It is not known how this might have influenced descriptions of the QSR process, but since workload came up as a theme it seems reasonable to consider that workers who were unable to participate because of their workload might have experiences different from the workers who were able to participate. Therefore, a limitation of the study is the unknown knowledge that is beyond the 14 participants and beyond the 3 states that participated.

Contribution to Existing Literature and Connections to Theory

This qualitative description presents themes about the QSR process from the point of view of frontline staff who have experienced QSR, and so presents important additional perspectives on performance evaluation and practice learning. One of the themes that emerged is that, to participants, the QSR serves as a practice intervention as well as an evaluation and that

the QSR process can highlight circumstances where best practice can be more clearly defined and operationalized. Patton (1998) asserts that evaluation processes should result in increased knowledge – their essential purpose is to answer a question about how well a program is functioning, or “what’s really going on” (Patton, 1998, p.1). Other researchers have suggested that complex systems, such as the child welfare systems discussed here, can effectively be evaluated with processes that simultaneously assess and increase knowledge about ways to improve practice and system strategies (Goerge & Wulczyn, 1996; Hoole & Patterson, 2008; Jacob, Ouard, & Belanger, 2010; Kerman, Freundlich, Lee, & Brenner, 2012; Martineau & Preskill, 2008). Participants offered some thoughts about how their experience with QSR compares to other forms of performance and practice evaluation. These themes suggest that for these participants, the QSR does serve that dual function of evaluating and supporting direct practice workers’ learning in the practice environment.

Participants also described strategies that supervisors used to assist workers as they prepared for the QSR review. Participants described feeling supported by their supervisors in preparing for the QSR, referencing supervisory skills that increase self-efficacy (Cooksey-Campbell, Folaron, & Williamson Sullenberger, 2013). Self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 2012) provides a framework for understanding both these supervisory techniques and the emotional responses workers felt about their practice environment. Self-efficacy theory proposes that the belief that one can achieve a desired outcome with available resources can affect people emotionally, and lacking the feeling that one can meet desired outcomes can lead to stress (Bandura, 2012). Findings here that describe supportive environments for implementing and using feedback from QSR and the resulting optimism about practice effectiveness are consistent

with studies that indicate that a work environment supportive of training assists with uptake of skills learned in training (Deglau et al., 2015; Liu & Smith, 2011)

The research questions in this study focused on QSR specifically, and questions about the practice environment were only intended to enhance understanding about the context in which QSR was being conducted. Still, important themes emerged across the interviews that warranted discussion of the practice environment in addition to the qualitative description of the QSR. These themes included the workers' perception that multiple systems are involved in child welfare practice and that the nature of child welfare work is changing to an environment that prioritizes data entry at the expense of face-to-face time with families. Here also there is a relationship with strategies used to assess child welfare practice. The use of nested quantitative models has led to analyses of community factors that can influence practice and practice outcomes (Wulczyn et al., 2013). These quantitative analyses require a significant amount of data to provide insight into the community factors that could be influencing practice. One of the themes that emerged in this study was that workers are challenged to find the time to provide family-centered practice strategies in systems that emphasize data collection. As practitioners and researcher continue to explore ways to evaluate the practice environment, both quantitatively and qualitatively, it may be useful to consider sources of data beyond the child welfare system. As multiple systems are involved in influencing practice, perhaps multiple systems offer potential information to contribute to evaluation and understanding. The Annie E. Casey Foundation is currently encouraging the development and use of integrated data systems, but the interest in improving data quality and access across public agencies for program improvement is not new (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2017; Turner, 1980).

This study adds to the current literature by adding frontline worker perspectives to the small but informative body of literature about QSR. Additionally, this project offered insights into the practice environment as experienced by frontline workers. Consistent with other studies that also explore child welfare practice through the eyes of its practitioners, descriptions of the practice environment as being overburdened emerged that underscore the importance of understanding how best to evaluate practice given the limited resources, including time, to do so (Agbenyega, 2011; Liu & Smith, 2011; Akin, Brook, Byers, & Lloyd, 2016).

Implications for practice. This study explored the relationship of qualitative service review processes to case practice, providing a direct practice worker perspective on the process of the review and its impact on their practice. The qualitative evaluation process explored in this study did reflect the practice environment in the ways it was intended, as a measure of best practice. There were some surprises revealed too. The stories participants shared about their experience highlight anxieties about practice, and their desire to be doing the best job possible for the families they work with. In complex systems like child welfare, the “only constant is change” because a steady state is never achieved. The relationship between action and effect is contextual, but not always predictable. It takes time to work, time to evaluate, time for changes to be made in patterns of behavior, attitudes, and system level functions, yet there are natural and imposed limits in the length of time available to work with a family. Cases open and close, and advocates and initiatives come and go, based on whether expectations for change that can occur within a certain time are met.

The challenge of these public child welfare agencies, these complex systems, is to develop evaluation strategies that will support “accountability” and support practice improvement. No participant stated that they needed more quantitative data, but some did

discuss gaps between what data is collected and what data actually informs practice. There is a surfeit of quantitative information but these measures are context-free at the case level, so workers struggle to apply this in practice. Qualitative information is highly contextual and useful at the case level, but it is not done on every case. Sometimes, efficiency is considered only as the amount of effort that goes into a process. This is understandable for overwhelmed systems. The QSR process is not simple or brief and it requires a large investment in time before, during, and after the review. Workers described the return it produces, emphasizing that it provides case-specific context with face-to-face input from families, service providers, courts, and case workers; an outside assessment of strengths and challenges in cases that workers and supervisors cannot do for their own practice; and gives case-specific next steps and office and agency-wide next steps. For this reason, it could be a highly efficient process for evaluating child welfare practice.

Implications for social work education. Several implications for social work education emerged. One is that social work educators should consider how to help students function in increasingly data-entry-oriented work environments. It may be that facility with computers and technology, and typing skills, are critical to minimizing time spent at the computer and maximizing time spent with families. A related challenge for social work academics is to help support agencies' use of data to provide evidence-based services and make improvements to practice, without enabling a habit of collecting information without clearly demonstrating how it is useful – and actually used. Two examples include the California Child Welfare Leadership Training (Cal-CWLT) partnership and the New Jersey Fellows Program. The Cal-CWLT partnership trains MSW students interested in careers in child welfare to identify opportunities to use data to inform practice using actual child welfare data, before they enter the field (Lery,

Putnam-Hornstein, Weigmann, & King, 2015; Shaw, Lee, & Wulczyn, 2012). The New Jersey Fellows Program was a competitive program for 100 staff of New Jersey's Department and Family Services, including direct practice and central administrative staff, to collaborate in identifying quantitative and qualitative data for use in improving direct practice and administrative practices at all levels of the agency (National Child Welfare Workforce Institute, 2012).

The participants in this study appeared to have been prepared for empathy-based secondary trauma. Feelings like worry and sadness for their families were not unusual and were accepted as part of the workers' job. However, there may be opportunities as educators to prepare future front-line staff for the emotional demands caused by frustration and a sense of helplessness in overtaxed work environments and to prepare future agency administrators for attending to the balance of demands and resources in more effective ways. Another dynamic at work in child welfare environments was risk – in a number of conversations, the sense of risk came up as a consideration in case decisions and as having an influence on the practice environment. Educators may have opportunities to consider risk at the micro level and how that influences decisions at the macro level. Elimination of all risk is not possible, and the continuum of risk can be seen as distinct from the continuum of protection of agency legal and public opinion liability. It may be that social work educators can give attention to helping rising social work professionals focus on the risks that can be managed at the micro and at the macro levels.

A number of participants talked about performance evaluations as being more focused on timelines and paperwork, rather than the results of the paperwork. Some participants described an ideal QSR as one where they could have someone watch them interact with families and go on visits with them. The desire for more opportunities for feedback in the practice setting was

apparent in these conversations, as was the contrast between qualitative reviews and quantitative performance reviews. Social work educators may have opportunities to help rising practitioners develop self-evaluating performance outside of “box ticky” performance reviews and advocating for the use of observation and mentoring as a means of providing supportive supervision. Other strategies that educators could consider is helping rising social workers get the most out of the supervision processes they have access to. Helping young social workers develop good questions to ask of their supervisors and mentors may help strengthen the supervisory processes available in resource-stretched child welfare agencies.

Implications for future research. A subtitle for just about any article referencing any topic within child welfare could be, “child welfare is difficult.” There may be no subjective statement that produces more agreement than that one. This is the motivating premise for research into child welfare, as academic researchers and program evaluators work towards revealing knowledge to make child welfare practice less difficult. This chapter might be titled, “Child Welfare is Difficult, Just Not for the Reasons I Thought.” The usual suspects of caseload size, turnover, difficult family circumstances, and the emotional nature of the job did emerge in our discussion, but the respondents in this study implicate accomplices behind the scenes. Future research that considers the impact of caseload complexity, rather than caseload size, for example, could add to understanding of workload-related stress.

This study also revealed more opportunities to better understand the child welfare work environment and how documentation tasks and face to face time with families are prioritized. It may be that the public child welfare worker role is evolving into one that is primarily a high level data entry and documentation position, while casework functions designed to support change through direct work with families are being contracted out to private providers. This is

consistent with participants' descriptions of their work environments. If so, there could be opportunities to better understand the extent to which this reflects the child welfare work environment, how it impacts child welfare system performance and funding, and implications for social work education. The study raises questions about the extent to which the emphasis in child welfare on documentation, outcomes, and performance measures reflects broader concerns about "neoliberal" influences on social work practice and social welfare policy (Hasenfeld & Garrow, 2012).

Secondary trauma that child welfare workers experience from working with families in very difficult situations is an important arm of child welfare research. This dynamic, and how it feels when you empathize with your families experiencing crisis, was certainly present in the conversations with workers. However, in the context of evaluation and efforts to implement best practice, it was feeling helpless to implement desired change that was discussed the most. Future research into the emotional exhaustion related to the practice context could help inform system changes to better support caseworkers.

Conclusion

The challenge of balancing safety and permanency continues to inform media and political debates over child welfare service philosophy and legal statutes. Ensuring safety and establishing permanency, all while supporting children's well-being, is the mission of every public child welfare agency in the United States. Child welfare workers have high caseloads and heavy workloads; child welfare systems operate under a set of challenging requirements, many under court reforms ranging from supportive to highly adversarial, and during a political period in which increasing accountability, oversight, and directives of government agencies is easier than increasing the resources available to government agencies. Given the reality of the practice

environment, it is necessary for work to produce something that can directly impact an activity that can be taken in the field to improve practice. Qualitative review processes use techniques that bear a theoretical and practical resemblance to principles of family centered practice, by using multiple stakeholder perspectives, rich interviews and individualized assessment, and supportive feedback for planning purposes (The Annie E. Casey Foundation & Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2011). Just as stakeholder voices inform our work in practice, qualitative research can amplify these voices in informing evaluation processes of critical social work functions in child welfare practice. Knowing more about how stakeholders perceive the QSR process and use it as a learning tool for future practice is an important piece in understanding how to support and improve the complex services of child welfare.

To that end, I conceived this project to inform our knowledge and understanding of direct child welfare workers' experiences and perspectives on qualitative case review process. This process is designed to look through the history of a case, provide an assessment of where the practice outcomes currently stand in relation to best practices, and offer next steps to change the case for the better. I wanted to understand how this evaluation process reflected best practice and in turn reinforced those practice concepts among child welfare workers, anticipating that understanding this would in turn help improve evaluation efforts in the complex systems that are child welfare. Seeking to describe a qualitative evaluation process within a complex system, public child welfare agencies, is one thing – seeking to understand the process and the system it evaluates is an entirely different undertaking. What is described as the practice environment today can change tomorrow; yet within this fast-paced, constantly moving environment, workers' greatest struggle was not against families in difficult situation, the multiple problems needing attention, or even competing priorities from systems involved in creating the practice

environment. It was against time. Caseloads, at their heart, represent time and the amount that can be budgeted to families. The quantitative outcomes that practice is measured against are measured against a time-limited standard for how long children may be in custody before parental rights are terminated. Aggregate data measures are important for identifying trends across many cases at one time; qualitative reviews take time to conduct and time to understand and implement the findings. It also takes time for workers to develop their practice skills in this changing environment, and the direct practitioners described QSR as a guide for best practice. So for this reason, an evaluation tool can also function as a practice improvement tool itself. A worker gives us the last word:

You can't teach how to engage your families, you have to do it and experience it and work your way through it and learn that way. You can practice all you want but when you're in the middle of it you really only truly learn, in my opinion, how to do it - teaming and all these things - by practicing. You can learn the skills, you can learn the book work but really to become good at it is to just do it. But how cool would it be though, to enhance those skills by doing the QSR to learn a different perspective?

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APPENDIX A – IRB APPROVAL



April 22, 2016

Bethany Womack
School of Social Work
The University of Alabama
Box 870314

Re: IRB # 16-OR-170, "Qualitative Service Review as a Learning Strategy for Child Welfare Practice Improvement"

Dear Ms. Womack:

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has granted approval for your proposed research.

Your application has been given expedited approval according to 45 CFR part 46. You have also been granted the requested waiver of written documentation of informed consent for telephone interviews. Approval has been given under expedited review category 7 as outlined below:

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Your application will expire on April 21, 2017. If your research will continue beyond this date, please complete the relevant portions of the IRB Renewal Application. If you wish to modify the application, please complete the Modification of an Approved Protocol form. Changes in this study cannot be initiated without IRB approval, except when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to participants. When the study closes, please complete the Request for Study Closure form.

Please use reproductions of the IRB approved stamped consent forms to obtain consent from participants interviewed in person.

Should you need to submit any further correspondence regarding this proposal, please include the above application number.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,

Carangelo L. Myers, M.Ed., Ph.D., CIP
Director & Research Compliance Officer
Office for Research Compliance

15B Rose Administration Building | Box 870122 | Tuscaloosa, AL 35895-1122
205-348-8461 | Fax 205-348-7189 | Toll Free 1-877-620-3066

AAHRPP DOCUMENT #192
UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA
HUMAN RESEARCH PROTECTION PROGRAM

Informed Consent for a Non-Medical Study

Study title: Qualitative Service Review as a Learning Strategy for Child Welfare Practice Improvement

Investigator's Name: Bethany Womack, MSSW, Doctoral Candidate

You are being asked to take part in a research study. This study is called QUALITATIVE SERVICE REVIEW AS A LEARNING STRATEGY FOR CHILD WELFARE PRACTICE IMPROVEMENT. The study is being done by BETHANY WOMACK, who is a graduate student at the University of Alabama. Bethany is being supervised by Brenda D. Smith, PhD, who is a Professor of Social Work at the University of Alabama.

Is the researcher being paid for this study? The researcher is not receiving payment for this study. The researcher is receiving a grant from the University that covers the cost of supplies and, possibly, some of her time.

What is this study about? What is the investigator trying to learn?

I am conducting this study to find out how child welfare workers experience qualitative service review processes and how it influences their practice.

Why is this study important or useful?

This knowledge is important and useful because public child welfare is a critical function of government. There are many state and federal processes in place to evaluate child welfare agencies' performance, but no research has been published yet that describes the practitioner perspective about qualitative service reviews. The results of this study will help practitioners, researchers, and policymakers understand better ways to help evaluate and improve child welfare practice.

Why have I been asked to be in this study?

You have been asked to be in this study because you are a caseworker, supervisor, or administrator who has participated in a qualitative service review.

How many people will be in this study?

About 30 other people will be in this study.

What will I be asked to do in this study?

If you decide to be in this study, you will be asked to do two things. One thing will be to participate in one in-person interview to talk about qualitative service review, what you learned from that experience, and how, if at all, it influenced future practice. The second thing will be to receive an electronic document with the researcher's "major

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 CONSENT FORM APPROVED: 4-22-16
 EXPIRATION DATE: 4-21-17

takeaways" from all the interviews, which will be sent after the data collected during the interviews is analyzed. You can, but you do not have to, give feedback about these takeaways to the researcher.

How much time will I spend being in this study?

Each interview should take about 60 minutes.
It should take about 15 minutes to review the "major takeaways."

Will being in this study cost me anything?

The only cost to you is your time.

Will I be compensated for being in this study?

You will not be compensated for being in the study. To thank you for your time, you will receive a gift card for \$20 upon completion of the interview to a local discount store.

What are the risks (dangers or harms) to me if I am in this study?

Little or no risk is foreseen. You may experience anxiety in answering some of the questions, since you will be talking about work-related experiences. There may be a risk that a job obligation may arise suddenly while you are in the interview. This risk may be minimized by rescheduling the interview.

What are the benefits (good things) that may happen if I am in this study?

There are no direct benefits to you. You may feel good about discussing your experiences in a way that is hoped to benefit the field of child welfare and those who practice it.

What are the benefits to science or society?

It is hoped that the results of this study will help practitioners, researchers, and policymakers understand better ways to evaluate and improve child welfare practice.

How will my privacy be protected?

The interview will take place in a private location of your choosing.

How will my confidentiality be protected?

The researcher will not tell the identity of participants to agency or University of Alabama staff. Your name will not be used during the interviews. Only the researcher will have access to both the signed confidentiality sheets and the interview recordings. If you agree to audio recording the interviews, the recordings will be stored in digital files on a password-protected device and in secure Box storage. If you decide not to have your interview audio recorded, I will take notes and will not include your name on them. Transcripts of interviews will be identified by a number and stored in a password-protected device and in secure Box storage.

Your name will be present on recruitment forms and, if you agree to participate, signed consent forms. The researcher will keep the interview schedule and signed consent

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 CONSENT FORM APPROVED: 4-22-16
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forms in a password-protected electronic device and locked drawer. The researcher will destroy identifying information after the study is over.

NOTE: If the researcher becomes aware of any abuse or neglect to a child or vulnerable adult, the researcher will report this to protective authorities. This may cause you to be contacted by these authorities.

What are the alternatives to being in this study? Do I have other choices?

The alternative to being in this study is not to participate.

What are my rights as a participant in this study?

Taking part in this study is voluntary. It is your free choice. You can refuse to be in it at all. If you start the study, you can stop at any time. There will be no effect on your relations with the University of Alabama. There will be no effect on your relations with your employing agency and state.

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board ("the IRB") is the committee that protects the rights of people in research studies. The IRB may review study records from time to time to be sure that people in research studies are being treated fairly and that the study is being carried out as planned.

Who do I call if I have questions or problems?

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the study right now, please ask them. If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the study later on, you can call the investigator Bethany Womack at 615-306-2301 or email bwomack@crimson.ua.edu. You can also call my advisor Brenda D. Smith at 205-348-6528 or email bsmith2@sw.ua.edu.

If you have questions about your rights as a person in a research study, call Ms. Tanta Myles, the Research Compliance Officer of the University, at 205-348-8461 or toll-free at 1-877-820-3066.

You may also ask questions, make suggestions, or file complaints and concerns through the IRB Outreach website at http://osp.ua.edu/site/PRCO_Welcome.html or email the Research Compliance office at participantoutreach@bama.ua.edu.

After you participate, you are encouraged to complete the survey for research participants that is online at the outreach website or you may ask the investigator for a copy of it and mail it to:

University Office for Research Compliance,
Box 870127,
358 Rose Administration Building,
Tuscaloosa, AL 35487-0127.

4-21-17

I have read this consent form. I have had a chance to ask questions. I agree to take part in it.

I will receive a copy of this consent form to keep.

Permission for my interview to be audio recorded:

Yes, I agree for my interview to be audio recorded.

No, I decline to have my interview audio recorded. I understand that the researcher will take notes instead.

Signature of Research Participant

Date

Signature of Investigator

Date

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA IRB CONSENT FORM APPROVED: 4-22-16

EXPIRATION DATE:

**UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA
HUMAN RESEARCH PROTECTION PROGRAM
TELEPHONE INFORMED CONSENT SCRIPT**

I am calling about a research study being conducted by researchers at the University of Alabama. We contacted you because you have participated in a Quality Service Review/Qualitative Case Review as a direct practice caseworker, supervisor, or administrator. Your [Insert title and name of Team Coordinator/Director here] provided me with your contact information for the study. The purpose of this study is to collect a comprehensive description of how direct practice staff in child welfare agencies experience having a case reviewed through a QSR/QCR process and perceive its influence on subsequent case practice.

If you decide to be in this study, you will be asked to do two things. One thing will be to participate in an interview to talk about qualitative service review, what you learned from that experience, and how, if at all, it influenced future practice. The second thing will be to receive an electronic document with the researcher's "major takeaways" from all the interviews, which will be sent after the data collected during the interviews is analyzed. You can, but you do not have to, give feedback about these takeaways to the researcher. Each interview should take about 60 minutes. It should take about 15 minutes to review the "major takeaways."

People in two other states are also being invited to participate. There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this study.

We hope your participation will help to introduce perspective from direct practitioners and administrators about this kind of review and best practice. The only risk is that some of the questions may make you feel anxious since you will be talking about job related experiences. Answering these questions is voluntary. That means you may decline to participate or, if you decide to participate, you may choose not to answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable or to stop the interview at any time.

To protect your confidentiality, your name will not be associated with your answers. Contact information containing your name will be kept in a password-protected computer and locked file cabinet only. Your name will not be associated with any interview transcripts or notes from the interviews. Audio files, transcripts, and notes from the interviews will be kept on a password-protected device until uploaded into secure Box storage, which is also password-protected.

UA IRB Approved Document
Approval date: 4-22-16
Expiration date: 4-21-17

You are free to contact me or my advisor if you have any concerns about the study and I will provide you with contact information if you request it.

To make sure I get your responses correct, and to make it easier for me to listen to your responses, I would like to audio record the interview. If you don't want to be audio recorded, I will take notes to make sure I collect your responses accurately. Your name will not be put on the recording or notes of your interview.

Is it okay with you if I tape record the interview?

Do you have any questions?

May I ask the first question?

Approval date:

Expiration date:

APPENDIX B – EXECUTIVE SUMMARY FOR PARTICIPANTS

The following document synthesizes information from 14 interviews with QSR participants. Participants' experiences were varied, so no one theme should be attributed to a specific participant. Themes in italics reflect those that emerged as suggestions for future QSRs.

What is the Qualitative Service/Case Review process like?

Preparation before review:

- The preparation required to prepare the case packets for review is very time consuming.
- The preparation process itself can serve as a supervisory and case intervention, because the focused attention on a case can result in new ideas for the team, or, can give the team a chance to address something that had been overlooked.
- Trainings about QSR provided to workers before the reviews provide good information about setting up a case, but more importantly they also cue workers on where to direct attention in their cases that were not selected for the review.
- *Since much worker time already goes into documentation as part of routine case work, respondents wondered if the time spent by staff preparing for QSR could be minimized if the computer systems could more easily produce those materials.*

During the review:

- In each state, reviewers usually went out on cases in teams of two. Participants who expressed thoughts about this were generally positive about this system because it allowed both an experienced reviewer with a general best practice orientation and child welfare workers from the home state/nearby areas to participate.
- *Reviewers primarily responsible for giving feedback should be social workers, with recent child welfare experience.*

Feedback and after the review:

- Family experience was the dominant theme of participants' discussion of feedback. Some respondents reported being "pleasantly surprised" at the parents' positive perception of their job as caseworker.
- Respondents generally described feedback positively, finding it especially meaningful when reviewers experienced, and so could validate, challenging dynamics among team members. Two respondents discussed what happened when reviewers did not interpret the team dynamics in the same way the workers and supervisors did. The feelings reported were "disheartening" and "discouraging," and in these instances supervisors and administrators were critical to helping the worker feel supported and identify next steps.
- Strengths-based feedback was overwhelmingly appreciated, even when scores were not as high as a caseworker hoped.
- Feedback is especially valuable to case workers when it can provide concrete next steps that are relevant to the policies in effect and resources available in workers' home areas. For context, was mentioned when respondents discussed reviewer pairs and the value of having local reviewers in a review team.

- *Respondents generally desired more feedback about family interactions – on more than one case and based on more than one interview with a family. Multiple respondents suggested that ideally, reviewers could witness them interacting with a family or at a home visit to assess that element of their practice.*

How does QSR relate to best practice?

- The QSR process provides feedback to workers about the families’ experience with the worker and agency, through 3rd parties not involved in the case, which other review processes do not do.
- Reviews focused on case events do not produce the degree of information about the quality of work that QSR does, nor do they promote increased understanding of best practice because they do not look at outcomes within the specific case context. Some respondents noted that the computer system can tell them if something is late or not filed, rather than needing a case file review.
- *Additional opportunities for agency-wide administration to assist in promoting best practice emerged from QSR. The “system” opportunities for improvement that are intended to support best practice on the frontlines should be visible and transparently addressed with direct practice staff.*
- *Agency administrators can also assist in practice improvement by liaising and advocating for child welfare with other human service agencies that have differing, and even competing, priorities. Examples given were local jail policies that restrict opportunities for contact with families and service providers with a punitive approach to behavioral health.*

What do workers and supervisors see as beneficial/ineffective about the QSR as a learning process about best practice?

- To be most meaningful to caseworkers, selected cases should not be too recently added to their caseloads (that is, it can be helpful to have a recently-transferred case reviewed as it helps you “get up to speed,” but it’s not as helpful in enhancing your own understanding of the way you practice) nor should they be recent exits from care – otherwise, feedback and next steps reflect hindsight, which is not as helpful as feedback on current cases.
- Being a reviewer in another area impacts one’s own practice as a worker and supervisor. Two reasons were mentioned: 1, reviewers can get ideas from other areas about how certain challenges are handled and 2, thinking through a case through the lens of the QSR tool strengthens one’s own understanding of best practice.
- Participants who had attended new reviewer trainings endorsed those as helping them understand best practice better.
- *Areas in which best practice needs to be defined or clarified emerged, such as, what should noncustodial parent engagement look like, given that each noncustodial parent situation is unique?*