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Foster parents' needs, perceptions and satisfaction with foster parent training: A systematic literature review

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ABSTRACT

This current systematic literature review aims to examine what is known about foster parents' needs, satisfaction and perceptions of foster parent training. A systematized search in relevant databases resulted in 13 publications, with mostly quantitative studies, originating from four countries. Research on foster parent training is scarce, and the satisfaction, needs and perceptions of foster parents were included as secondary outcomes in most of the reviewed studies. A synthesis of the results from the reviewed quantitative studies indicate high levels of user satisfaction, whereas qualitative findings indicate needs for more advanced training on parenting children with special needs, and more real life and flexible practice/training. In conclusion, more research is needed to increase the knowledge on prospective and current foster parents' perceptions of, and satisfaction with foster parent training, and their needs for training.

1. Introduction

In many states and countries, the preferred state provision for children in out-of-home care is placement in foster families. Foster families have, on behalf of the state, taken on the responsibility of caring for the child. In their role as foster parents, they are expected to take care of the child, understand the child's background and help the child to further his/her development (in school, medical and psychological health, etc.) (De Maeyer, Vanderfaeillie, Robberechts, Vanschoonlandt, & Van Holen, 2015). In most countries and states, foster parent training is a legal requirement. As such, training is considered necessary to provide foster parents with the knowledge, skills, and support needed to develop positive parent-child relationships and manage potential emotional and behavioral problems of the child (Buehler, Rhodes, Orme, & Cuddeback, 2006; Cox, Orme, & Rhodes, 2003).

Children in foster care can struggle with repercussions of previous challenges in their home environment (e.g., physical abuse, neglect), and some have also faced challenges in other arenas, such as school and social relations. Such risk factors and challenges makes children in foster care a vulnerable population, with a high prevalence of developmental, medical, and mental health needs when compared to children in the general population (Cooley, Thompson, & Newell, 2018; Jee et al., 2010). The vulnerability of foster children places a high demand on foster parents and their creation and sustainment of productive relationships with fostering and training agencies (Cooley & Petren, 2011). Foster parents often endure a high burden of care and consequently have high needs for support and training (Murray, Tarren-Sweeney, & France, 2011). International research indicates that placement breakdown is a major issue in family foster care (Vanderfaeillie, Goemans, Damen, Van Holen, & Pijnenburg, 2018). Moreover, the foster care system faces organizational problems such as large caseloads, high staff turnover, and agencies often have difficulty providing.

adequate, accessible, and appropriate services for the families in their care (Chipungu & Bent-Goodley, 2004). Lack of adequate training and support, even after being licensed, is one of the most frequently cited reasons for foster parents discontinuing their participation in foster care (Crase et al., 2000; Gilbertson & Barber, 2003). It is important to understand foster parents' needs so that the training matches the foster parents' needs for competence.

Rigorous evaluations of foster parent training are limited (Festinger & Baker, 2013; Rork & McNeil, 2011). Brown and Bednar (2006) underline that there are multiple studies on the challenges of foster placements written from the perspective of professionals, but there are relatively few studies focusing on the perspective of foster parents themselves. However, there is some evidence indicating that foster parent training has been found to be a prerequisite for successful fostering (i.e., preventing/avoiding placement breakdown) for both the children and the foster parents (Dorsey et al., 2008; Solomon, Niec, & Schoonover, 2016; Whenan, Oxlad, & Lushington, 2009). Completed foster parent training has been associated with several benefits, such as

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higher levels of parenting skills (Akin, Yan, McDonald, & Moon, 2017), wellbeing and increased role satisfaction (Randle, Miller, & Dolnicar, 2017). Such training is also associated with greater willingness to help children connect with their biological parents (Cooley & Petren, 2011; Fees et al., 1998; McNeil, Herschell, Gurwitch, & Clemens-Mowrer, 2005; Sanchirico & Jablonka, 2000; Solomon et al., 2016; Whenan et al., 2009). Results from a recent meta-analysis on the impact of foster parent training on parenting skills and disruptive child behavior indicates that foster parents who were involved in training reported fewer child behavior problems than parents who did not receive the training (Solomon, Niec, & Schoonover, 2017). In sum, these findings indicate that training can have positive effects. At the same time, despite the potential benefits of foster parent training, many foster parents feel inadequately prepared for the task of being a foster parent, even after participating in various programs (Cuddeback & Orme, 2002; MacGregor, Rodger, Cummings, & Leschied, 2006).

The present literature review critically examines the existing empirical literature on foster parent training and aims to synthesize the scientific literature on foster parent training to gain an understanding of the strengths and limitations of foster parent training as perceived by foster parents.[1] To our knowledge, there exists no such systematic review regarding foster parents' needs, satisfaction and perceptions of foster parent training. This review is meant to provide an overview of the existing literature, aiming to expand policy-makers' and practitioners' knowledge of foster parents' needs. Knowledge about how foster parents perceive foster parent training is important to further develop and disseminate efficient training programs and interventions of high quality. This review is also meant to provide a basis for formulating future research.

2. Method

This systematic review is based on articles in peer-reviewed academic journals regarding “foster parents' needs, satisfaction and perceptions of foster parent training.” Methods were followed as outlined by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses Statement (Liberati et al., 2009).

2.1. The review research question

To develop a literature search strategy, the review research question was formulated in accordance with the PICO (population, intervention, comparison, outcome) framework (Schardt, Adams, Owens, Keitz, & Fontelo, 2007). The research question is: *What do we know (O) about foster parents' (P) perceptions of, and satisfaction with foster parent training, and what are their needs for training (I, C)*?

2.2. Search strategy

A search was conducted for published, peer-reviewed studies of foster parents' perceptions of foster parent training across five databases. Citation tracking and reference list checking was undertaken for the included articles. The electronic bibliographic databases PsychINFO, MEDLINE, PubMED and ERIC were chosen because of their relevance. Because the authors' native language is Norwegian, English search terms were translated and used in the database Idunn, which contains research literature in Scandinavian languages (Norwegian, Swedish and Danish); this was done to include potential Scandinavian articles. Search terms were defined by the researchers, with a quality assessment by The Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs (Bufdir). The search terms (see Table 1) were entered as both keywords and MeSH terms in each database. Search areas included Title, Abstract, Keywords and Topic. Each database was searched for articles published from the onset of records up until May 3rd, 2018. In the period following the search up until preparation of the manuscript, automatic searches were set up in each database. This did not contribute additional articles.

Table 1
Search terms.

Foster care OR foster parent OR foster home
AND
Training
AND
Perception* OR satisfaction OR need

Note: (*) is used to provide all possible variations of the word.

2.3. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

To be eligible for inclusion, studies were required to be written in English or a Scandinavian language (Norwegian, Danish or Swedish) and to describe foster parents' needs, satisfaction and perceptions of foster parent training. Training often addresses a wide array of topics, and that different training approaches differentially emphasize these domains, and there is substantial variation in how training is actually provided (Dorsey et al., 2008). Studies focusing on all types of foster parent training programs or foster parent training modules (i.e., pre-service or in-service, single session or multisession) were included in the present literature review. Furthermore, studies on foster parents' perceptions/experiences with foster parent training programs/modules and foster parents' expressions of their needs related to foster parent training programs/modules will be included, as well as studies on foster parents' levels of user satisfaction or general satisfaction with training programs/modules. Exclusion criteria were: exclusively focusing on adoption or focus on general (biological) parent training - including training for parents whose children are in foster care. Study bias was not a selection criterion throughout the retrieval process.

2.4. Data extraction, management and analysis

The searches returned 4063 articles, which, in a stepwise manner, were filtered for their fit using the inclusion and exclusion criteria (Fig. 1). References were imported to EndNote X8 for Windows. Before manual screening commenced, duplicates were removed and articles with missing author and/or title information were excluded based on EndNote functionality. In the manual process, articles were initially independently screened for inclusion based on title by two researchers (JK, EL). Conflicting decisions were resolved by discussion. Next, the same process was repeated based on abstracts. Finally, full texts of potentially relevant studies were assessed for eligibility by at least two of the authors (JK, EL, LM). Discrepancies were resolved by discussion among all three authors until consensus on inclusion or exclusion was reached. From the searches, 11 studies were included. Additionally, two studies were included from citation tracking and reference list checking.

The included studies were analyzed using a thematic synthesis approach (Thomas et al., 2004; Thomas & Harden, 2008). Thematic synthesis has three stages: 1) the coding of text “line-by-line”; 2) the development of descriptive themes; and 3) the generation of analytical themes. While the development of descriptive themes remains close to the primary studies, the analytical themes represent a stage of interpretation whereby the reviewers go beyond the primary studies and generate new interpretive constructs, explanations or hypotheses (Thomas & Harden, 2008).

Table 2 presents an overview of the references included and the following characteristics of each of the 13 studies: Author(s) (year of

[1] The review is part of a project evaluating existing knowledge on foster parent training and was funded by the Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs.

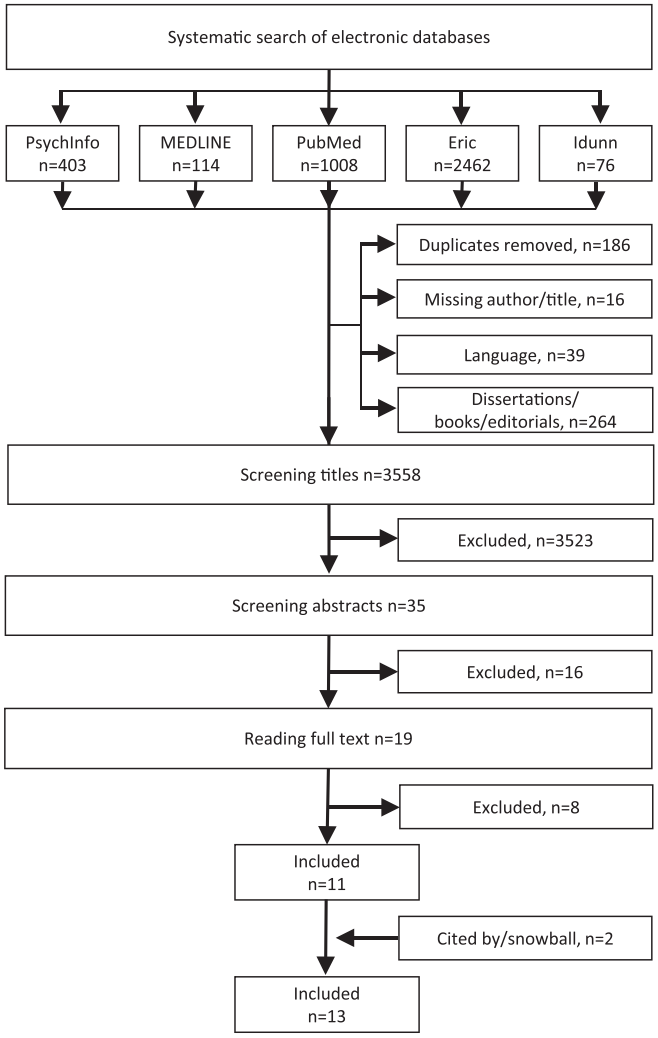

Fig. 1. Overview of systematized search strategy.

publication)/country; title; research purpose; method; N (number of respondents/informants); gender distribution; age distribution; ethnicity; fostering experience; respondents/data; and main findings. The second author extracted the information as listed above; then, the first author compared the completed extraction sheets with the full text of each paper to check the accuracy of the extractions. Any disagreements between the extractor and the checker were resolved by reconsulting the full text, followed by a discussion between the two researchers. In the first stage, we entered the verbatim findings of these studies into our database. Two researchers (JK, EL) independently coded each line of text according to their meaning and content. The second step was the development of descriptive themes. The third step of going beyond the content of the original studies was achieved by using the descriptive themes that emerged from our inductive analysis of study findings to answer the review question. Reviewers inferred strengths and limitations (barriers and facilitators) from the views foster parents were expressing about foster parent training in general, captured by the descriptive themes. Each researcher first did this independently and then as a group. Through this discussion, the researchers developed more abstract or analytical themes.

3. Results

3.1. Description of the reviewed studies,their study participants and foster parent training programs/modules

Of the included studies, 10 described situations found in the USA, one in New Zealand, one in the UK, and one in Canada. The articles were published between 2002 and 2018, with the majority published after 2010. Of the included studies, foster parents' perceptions of foster parent training comprised the primary scope in two studies (Hebert & Kulkin, 2017; Murray et al., 2011). In eleven studies, foster parents' perceptions of foster parent training were incorporated as a secondary scope, whereas the primary aim of these studies involved the general needs of foster parents, the effectiveness of foster parent training programs, perception of own competence, differences between kinship and nonkinship fostering, and satisfaction with foster parenting and training.

Of the thirteen included studies, nine were quantitative studies, whereas four studies used mixed methods (Barnett et al., 2018; Buzhardt & Heitzman-Powell, 2006; Cooley & Petren, 2011; Hebert & Kulkin, 2017). Only two of the studies contained interviews (individual or focus group) as a part of the methodology (Barnett et al., 2018; Murray et al., 2011). As shown in Table 2, seven of the studies were longitudinal (pre−/posttraining) (e.g., (Buzhardt & Heitzman-Powell, 2006)), whereas, in six studies, a cross-sectional design was used. In one study, a randomized trial design (Delaney, Nelson, Pacifici, White, & Smalley, 2012) was used. In most of the studies, quantitative measures of user satisfaction with foster parent training were used (Table 2). Qualitative methods used in the included studies included open-ended questionnaires and interviews.

In total, 2042 foster parents participated in the included studies, with a range of 17 to 733 participants (Table 2). Across two studies, 44 individuals were interviewed. The remaining participants (n = 1998) responded to open- and close-ended questionnaires. Most of the respondents were female (71.5%), ranging from 60% to 100% in individual studies. The average age of the participants was 45.8 years (range 25 to 71). Ethnicities represented in the studies were white (American, New Zealand, European), African American, Native American, biracial, multiracial, Hispanic/Latino, Maori, and other Pacific. Fostering experience ranged from zero to 250 foster children and from zero to 42 years of fostering.

In the included studies, the following foster parent training programs were represented: MAPP/GPS training (Cooley & Petren, 2011); PRIDE (Nash & Flynn, 2016); Park's Parenting approach (Davies, Webber, & Briskman, 2015); a module on training of foster parents in loyalty conflict, used as an extension of the MAPP program (Mehta, Baker, & Chong, 2013); Foster Parent College (multimedia training modules, and web-enhanced training modules) (Delaney et al., 2012; Pacifici, Delaney, White, Cummings, & Nelson, 2005; Pacifici, Delaney, White, Nelson, & Cummings, 2006); two modules of an online foster parent training (Buzhardt & Heitzman-Powell, 2006); a combination of the Blended Preservice Training curriculum with Foundations in Fostering, Adopting, or Caring for Relative Children Training (White et al., 2014); and nine foster parent training modules developed by the CYFS and the New Zealand Family and Foster Care Federation (NZFFCF) (Murray et al., 2011). In some studies, various foster parent training programs (not specified) were included (Barnett et al., 2018; Cuddeback & Orme, 2002). One study (Hebert & Kulkin, 2017) included a combination of various specified foster parent training programs (i.e., MAPP precertification training, the Louisianan Foster Parent Association Yearly conference, some training hours through the Department of Children and Family Services, some hours through private organizations, and obtaining hours online). Of the included studies, two studies concerned pre-service training programs (Delaney et al., 2012; Nash et al., Nash & Flynn, 2016). The remaining studies concerned in-service training programs or modules.

Table 2
Overview of included references.

Reference/Country/	Title	Research purpose	Method and number of participants (n)	Gender and age distribution	Ethnicity	Fostering experience	Main findings
Barnett et al. (2018) USA	Foster and adoptive parent perspectives on needs and services: a mixed methods study	Study foster and adoptive parents regarding their needs and those of the children for whom they care, as well as the capacity for services to meet these needs.	Mixed methods; focus groups and survey. Focus group, $n = 27$; survey, $n = 512$ (215 adoptive parents, 168 foster parents, 66 both foster- and adoptive parents) (42% response rate)	Focus group: 70% female Survey: 74% female M [a] 47 years.		Focus group: M 2 children-15% have birth children, licensed average 6.3 years. Survey: 55% have birth children, 59% licensed > 3 years.	Foster parents wanted more advanced training to help them meet the mental health needs of children. They lack support, particularly after placement.
Buzhardt and Heitzman-Powell (2006) (2006) USA	Field evaluation of an online foster parent training system	To assess: 1) user satisfaction and usability of the system (foster parents and social workers); and 2) the instructional effectiveness of the two modules for foster parents	Online user satisfaction survey before and after field trial. $n = 7$ social workers, $n = 22$ foster parents	Social worker: 100% female. M 29.7 (25–43) years Foster parent: 82% female, M 43.1 (26–65) years	Social worker: 100% white Foster parent: 73% white, 4% African American, 8% Native American		Foster parents made pre−/post-test gains in both content areas. Both foster parents and social workers gave the system high ratings on satisfaction
Cooley and Petren (2011) USA	Foster parent perceptions of competency: Implications for foster parent training	Assess perceived competency of foster parents, subsequent to pre-service training.	Online survey, open end questions and Likert scales. $n = 20$ (23 answers- 27% response rate)	70% female, M 34 years	25% African American, 65% Caucasian, 5% Native American	50% have own (biological) children	Large individual differences were uncovered regarding satisfaction with training.
Cuddeback and Orme (2002) USA	Training and services for kinship and nonkinship foster families	Examines the training and services received by kinship and nonkinship foster families.	Multistage stratified sampling. Mail survey. $n = 733$ (Kinship: $n = 74$; Nonkinship: $n = 659$) 69% response rate.	M mothers 43 years, fathers 45 years	Non-kin: 75% white, kin 55% white		Levels of training and services received were inadequate for both groups. Few differences were found between kinship and nonkinship caregivers.
Davies et al., 2015UK	Evaluation of training programme for foster carers in an independent fostering agency	Evaluate a parenting programme designed for foster carers from an independent fostering agency	Pre- and post- questionnaires. $n = 61$ (55 completed the training program), 46% response rate	68% female, M 49 (27–66) years		1–6 years (M = 3), 1–59 children (M = 4)	Decrease in foster children's problem behaviors, and an increase in carer confidence. High levels of carer satisfaction with training.
Delaney et al. (2012) USA	Web-enhanced preservice training for prospective resource parents: a randomized trial of effectiveness and user satisfaction	Compares the effectiveness of online and classroom versions of one session from a preservice training program through random assignment.	Self-report questionnaire. Treatment group: $n = 41$, Comparison group: n = 51	60% female, M 38.6 years	89% White, 7% Black/African American, 4% Biracial. 10% Latino	86% no previous foster parent training	The online training was more effective at increasing knowledge, compared with classroom training. High levels of satisfaction with online course.
Hebert and Kulkin (2017) USA	An investigation of foster parent training needs	Examines what a group of foster parents attending a state foster parent association conference felt they needed in the area of training to help them fulfil their role.	Questionnaire with two quantitative sections and a qualitative open-ended question. $n = 50$	76% female, M 54 years (32–58)	African American 54%, Caucasian 40%, Latino 4%, Native American 2%	1–250 children (M = 41). 57% had adopted foster children. M 18.8 h foster parent training attended for the year.	Foster parents ranked training to enhance their ability to help the child adjust in their homes and manage challenging behaviors as most needed.
Mehta, Baker, and Chong (2013) USA	Training foster parents in loyalty conflict: a training evaluation	Evaluate the foster parent training session on loyalty conflict.	Pretest-posttest design. $n = 52$	90% female, M 55 years		15 had > 10 years of experience, 28 provided kinship care, 19 non-kinship and 5 both	Data support the belief that foster parents want to learn about loyalty conflict and can benefit from a single training on it.
Murray et al. (2011) New Zealand	Foster carer perceptions of support and training in the context of high burden of care	Describes a mixed-methods study of foster carers' perceived need for support and training, referenced to estimates of their burden of care.	Semi-structured interviews. $n = 17$ (30% participation rate)	3 males, 14 females, Age (years): 39–71, M = 57	10 New Zealand European, 5 Maori, 2 other pacific	M length of service 27.5 years (2–42). M 25 children (2−100)	Carers' highest priority need was for training and support on managing and responding to children's mental health difficulties.
Nash and Flynn (2016) Canada	Foster and adoptive parent training: a process and outcome investigation of the preservice PRIDE program	Assessing in detail the process of preservice PRIDE training; What factors predict participants' perception of the quality of training? How satisfied are participants with their training?	Pretest-posttest design. $n = 174$ (data for all participants not available on all measures)	60% female			Training quality was a positive and statistically significant predictor of both gains in knowledge of the PRIDE competencies and satisfaction with training.

(*continued on next page*)

Table 2 (*continued*)

Reference/Country/	Title	Research purpose	Method and number of participants (n)	Gender and age distribution	Ethnicity	Fostering experience	Main findings
Pacifici et al. (2006) USA	Web-based training for foster, adoptive, and kinship parents	Examined the effectiveness of two online courses – on lying and sexualized behavior	Pre- and posttest intervention assessments. *n* = 97	69% female, M = 57 years	Hispanic/Latino 10%. White 75%, Black 10%, Native American 2%, Multiracial 3%	M Fostered for 7 years, Cared for 26 children	Significant gains in parent knowledge for both courses. User satisfaction and implementation fidelity were high.
Pacifici et al. (2005) USA	Foster parent college: interactive multimedia training for foster parents	Assess the effectiveness of a brief DVD training module, through random assignment.	Pre- and posttest questionnaire on parent knowledge and parent perceptions. n = 74	92% female, M: 46 years	90% Non-Hispanic, 3% Hispanic. 20% Non-white,	M 2 current foster children	The results supported the efficacy of DVD as a means of providing in-service training to foster parents at home.
White et al., 2014USA	Efficacy of blended preservice training for resource parents	Compare the efficacy of blended online in-person approach with traditional classroom-only approach	Pre- and posttest questionnaire. *n* = 111. (Treatment group: *n* = 57; Comparison group: *n* = 54)	62% female, Age: M = 40 years	85% White, 5% Black, 2% Native American, 7% Biracial. 6% Latino		Significantly greater gains in knowledge for the blended approach over the classroom-only approach.

[a] M = mean (average).

3.2. Satisfaction with foster parent training programs or modules

The user satisfaction with foster parent training programs or modules was relatively high in the majority of the included studies (Barnett et al., 2018; Davies et al., 2015; Nash & Flynn, 2016; Pacifici et al., 2005; Pacifici et al., 2006; White et al., 2014). In a study by Barnett et al. (2018), the researchers attempted to survey all foster and adoptive parents from the past 10 years for whom the state child welfare agency had physical or email addresses. Regarding satisfaction with various trainings, the results indicated that 44% rated the training quite/extremely useful; 32% moderately useful and 25% not/slightly useful. Buehler et al. (2006) found that overall user satisfaction was also high for the online training modules. Users completed online satisfaction surveys before and after the field trial. However, foster parents were less consistent in their ratings of the importance of the training modules' content.

Davies et al. (2015) reported that 95% (n = 39) of the foster care parents who completed the User Satisfaction Questionnaire at the beginning and on completion of the program were extremely positive towards a parenting program designed by an independent fostering agency (adaption of Park's Parenting Approach). However, when asked about the course content and the training style, only 34% (n = 13) felt that the course content was easily understood and that the training style and use of practice examples supported their learning. In a study by Nash and Flynn (2016), the participants experienced a large pre−/posttest mean gain (d = 1.17, p b 0.001) on total scores for the primary outcome measure; knowledge of the PRIDE competencies, which were taught by the program. The mean participant satisfaction score with PRIDE training was high (M = 74.43 out of a maximum 84, n = 130).

All participations in Pacifici et al. (2005) had an average score higher than 2.5, using a user satisfaction scale ranging from 1 (not at all satisfied) to 4 (very much satisfied). User satisfaction was measured in the last week of the training-course. Pre- and postintervention assessments were conducted in Pacifici et al. (2006), and 71% of the sampled group gave the web-based courses (Foster Parent College) an overall rating of 8 or higher, and only 5% gave the courses a rating below 5 (on a scale of 1–10, where 1 is the poorest quality and 10 is the highest). White et al. (2014) compared the efficacy of a blended online (treatment) and in-person (comparison) approach with a traditional classroom-only approachThey reported high levels of user satisfaction with overall training in both the treatment group and comparison group (M = 4.37, SD = 0.41 and M = 4.33, SD = 0.46, respectively, as measured on a scale from 1 to 5, where higher scores indicated greater satisfaction).

3.3. Need for training in specific themes faced by foster parents

Several of the studies noted a need for training that could be considered *parenting special needs children*. Two studies highlighted the need for increased training on issues regarding the *mental health* of foster children. As indicated by Barnett et al. (2018), parents wanted more advanced training to help them meet the mental health and trauma sequelae needs of children. Moreover, parents reported limited availability of mental health providers with the necessary expertise to treat the special needs of children in foster and adoptive care and their families. Hebert & Kulkin, 2017) identified unmet needs in psychological disorders trainings. Participants in the Murray et al.'s (2011) study indicated that they would like training on children's behavior to incorporate information on normal and abnormal developmental patterns so that they could figure out when a specific behavior fell within “normal” limits or when to seek intervention. The participants also expressed that they would like information on how disrupted attachment affects children's behavior and how they could support foster children to develop secure attachment systems. Moreover, they would like to access further training that focuses on the etiology of the children's behavior and the impact of trauma and neglect on children's

development over time (Murray et al., 2011). A need for more training on the effects of trauma was also indicated in a study by Hebert and Kulkin (2017). In two studies, foster parents expressed a need for increased training on medication use and Cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) (Cooley & Petren, 2011; Hebert & Kulkin, 2017). Other special needs expressed in the reviewed studies included more training on handling ADHD with co-existing disorders in young children (Hebert & Kulkin, 2017) and sexually abused or handicapped children (Cuddeback & Orme, 2002).

Specific information on working with *diversity and culture* in the context of foster children was highlighted in a study by Cooley and Petren (2011). However, in a study by Hebert and Kulkin (2017), the results showed that cultural diversity training (particularly working with transgender youth) was ranked as the least-needed training. Three of the studies also focused on the more *personal needs of foster parents*. Participants in a study by Murray et al. (2011) identified a need for training to prevent burn out, and they indicated that they would appreciate access to training to support them in their role as foster parents. Mehta et al. (2013) found that foster parents want to learn about loyalty conflict, and that they can benefit from a single training on it. The authors suggested that, by increasing knowledge about loyalty conflict and about ways in which foster parents can address loyalty conflict, the training may provide foster parents with a sense of preparedness and empowerment. The qualitative results from a study by Hebert and Kulkin (2017) also suggest that foster parents feel that they need specialized training to be able to adequately care for the children they take into their care. The foster parent participants in that study also shared a need for support and resources.

3.4. Flexibility, format and approach of the training program/modules

The usability and practical aspects of the training program/modules were valued as important in several of the included studies, and flexibility was considered a positive feature of the training programs or modules. Responses to open-ended questions in Barnett et al.'s (2018) study indicated an appeal for training resources that are not bound by specific times and/or locations. A few participants in a study by Murray et al. (2011) expressed problems with accessing the training modules (e.g., difficulties funding child care while they were at training; accessibility/timing of the training; frequency of courses offered; and funding for attending courses). One foster parent in another study (Buzhardt & Heitzman-Powell, 2006) commented that the use of online training modules "is so much easier than trying to schedule times around work and finding a babysitter to go to training classes," and "[Using the online training system] I would have time to learn at my own speed."

Roughly half of the participants in another study (Murray et al., 2011) indicated that they would be interested in *alternative training formats*, enabling them to access training options in their own homes. Some of the formats suggested included computer-based training, correspondence training and one-on-one training in their own home. Although the majority of informants were positive towards online training (Delaney et al., 2012; Pacifici et al., 2005; Pacifici et al., 2006; White et al., 2014), a few participants expressed unhappiness about having to wait for material to download, confusion regarding navigating the site, or a sense they might have missed something by not being in a classroom (Delaney et al., 2012). In the study by Delaney et al. (2012), participants expressed the most satisfaction with the *interactive exercises,* which they found very helpful. In the exercises, viewers heard a series of statements on a topic and were asked to choose, for example, whether the statements were true or false. After viewers clicked on an answer, they immediately received feedback on the correct answer. Throughout the course, there were interactive exercises to help viewers understand and retain the course content.

The approach and the language/communication used in the training were acknowledged as important for some of the foster parents' learning experiences. Some of the participants in a study by Davies et al. (2015) commented that humor and a "down to earth" approach helped/increased the learning outcomes. Hebert and Kulkin (2017) suggested that promotion of future training programs can be improved by communicating the nature of the topic in lay terms that are better understood by foster parents. The authors suggested that this may be particularly relevant for foster parents with less education, as the study found that those with lower levels of education found the training to be less useful.

The need for real life practice or training was expressed in two of the reviewed studies. In a study by Cooley and Petren (2011), interaction with "expert-users" (i.e., current, experienced and "veteran" foster care parents) was sought during preservice training. In addition, the importance of having current foster parents involved in training "to show their point of view of the process and what they [expected as a new foster parent] or appreciated" was highlighted as important. Furthermore, discussion of real-life examples and situations that may arise during foster parenting were indicated as relevant training needs (Cooley & Petren, 2011). Davies et al. (2015) reported that some parents felt that more role-playing of managing difficult situations would have been useful along with more time to discuss the experiences they were having. Several participants (34%, $n = 13$) reported that the use of practice examples supported their learning (Davies et al., 2015). Moreover, in a study of Davies et al. (2015), foster parents also valued the homework they were given and felt this helped them to consolidate their skills and learning along with the group process.

3.5. Training needs beyond existing preservice/in-service sessions

Some of the parents in the study by Cooley and Petren (2011) expressed a need for information that would be physically available beyond training, such as "a step by step guide in helping me to deal with the different aspects of fostering." Another respondent expressed a similar need for "a *reference manual* to distribute to foster parents to help show the different agencies that may need to be contacted for assistance with the various aspects of foster care." In addition, there was also indication of a desire to *list an overview of future trainings/training sessions* for foster parents (Cooley & Petren, 2011). Also, Barnett et al. (2018) underlined that foster parents lack support, particularly after placement.

4. Discussion

Through this systematic literature review, we found that research on foster parent training is scarce and that the satisfaction, needs and perceptions of foster parents are included as secondary outcomes in most of the reviewed studies. A synthesis of the results from the reviewed studies indicates that foster parents are relatively satisfied with trainings, as measured in quantitative studies using user satisfaction ratings. However, the qualitative findings indicate new knowledge needs, new educational modules and training in new platforms. The review gives a basis for developing training for foster parents, which could also lead to more stability in foster placement.

4.1. User satisfaction ratings and expressed needs

The findings from the current literature review indicate high levels of user satisfaction with various foster parent training programs/modules. At the same time, the foster parents express unmet needs for training regarding parenting children with special needs and training in real-life situations. A major issue in the measurement of user satisfaction is the problem of positive response bias. Previous research in adjacent areas has demonstrated that satisfaction with social programs tends to be excessively positive, regardless of the actual services provided (Bailey Jr., Hebbeler, Scarborough, Spiker, & Mallik, 2004; Collins, 1999; Lanners & Mombaerts, 2000; Willis, Evandrou, Pathak, &

Khambhaita, 2016). In line with previous studies on user satisfaction in child welfare (Mundy, Neufeld, & Wells, 2016; Tilbury, Osmond, & Crawford, 2010), the results from the present literature review indicate that quantitative user satisfaction scales and the qualitative responses in the open-ended questions will naturally yield different perspectives on the foster parent training programs/modules. This underlines the importance of method triangulation (i.e., a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods) when further investigating foster parents' perceptions, needs and satisfaction with foster parent training.

4.2. Knowledge needs, educational modules and flexible training using new platforms

Findings from this review show that foster parents have unmet training needs regarding parenting children with special needs and how to manage their roles as foster parents. The knowledge base of foster parents should reflect societal development and the needs of the foster parents and children. We see some topics that have been given less attention even though they seem relevant considering developments in society and child welfare services. The first one is the need for increased knowledge of specific conditions that may support foster children with a minority background. This is becoming increasingly important, as an increasing number of children in foster care have a minority background (Leloux-Opmeer, Kuiper, Swaab, & Scholte, 2016). Children with a minority background can have different or additional needs that must be attended, for example, related to their background and being given the possibility of maintaining their language and cultural and religious background (Berg et al., 2017). The second topic is kinship care, which was only included in three of the reviewed studies (Cuddeback & Orme, 2002; Mehta et al., 2013; Pacifici et al., 2006). Many children are placed in kinship care, and it may be that foster parents in kinship care have other needs in training and support, for example, how to facilitate appropriate parental contact (Kiraly & Humphreys, 2013).

The literature in this study suggests that several (aspiring) foster parents have a need for more concrete or “real-life” training and more reflection and discussion of practical cases. Moreover, a lack of sufficient training resources could be seen as one of the main reasons for dropping out of the foster care system (Buzhardt & Heitzman-Powell, 2006). Although the research is scarce, online applications and digital training platforms seem promising for providing new training opportunities for foster parents (Buzhardt & Heitzman-Powell, 2006; Delaney et al., 2012; Pacifici et al., 2005; Pacifici et al., 2006; White et al., 2014). Currently, training resources, particularly for foster parents living in rural areas, are often difficult to access due to a lack of time and/or the inability to travel long distances for group training sessions. Therefore, online training appears to be a viable option for this population (Buzhardt & Heitzman-Powell, 2006). One advantage of online training programs is that they can reach foster parents who may have difficulty getting to traditional multisession training programs.

Online training can also complement or enhance in-person training. Another advantage of online training programs is that the content and presentation can be standardized by utilizing professional trainers. Foster parents may have more differentiated and customized training, and if they want, they may have the option to repeat content in certain modules if they need to do so. In addition, there is a growing trend for interactive multimedia instructions/tutorials, which are positively received within the more general parenting training (Davies et al., 2015). Online training is also cost-effective for both child welfare agencies and parents. Online training can be easier to regulate and document. One example is “The new generation of FosterPRIDE/AdoptPRIDE7” (Child Welfare League of America, 2018), which is organized into five group/in-sessions (personal attendance) and four online parts. Several authors (e.g. Buzhardt & Heitzman-Powell, 2006; White et al., 2014) suggest that a blended approach (i.e. a combination of online and in-person) could be beneficial to increase the learning and raise the numbers of prospective and current foster parents completing the training.

Several authors discussed a lack of skill training for being a good foster parent once the child moved into the foster home. The preservice courses cover many central themes, but they do not foster their parents' experiences with theoretical knowledge. Therefore, there are good reasons to concentrate more on the in-service programs and/or modules in which foster parents (and any child protection staff) can use their own experiences in further learning. Building learning on a mix of lived experiences and theoretical knowledge appears to be preferred by foster parents, and should be included and tested in other training courses as well. New technologies may afford the capability to provide more realistic modeling and skill practice opportunities in foster parent training. One example of a platform that could be used is virtual reality (VR) (Jones et al., 2013). The use of VR may enable a connection between the use of skills in training sessions and the use of skills in contexts beyond the training setting and instead in the foster home, where foster parents may need to utilize their new skills. Virtual reality, in addition to therapist coaching and support (i.e., from mental health services), has the potential to provide foster parents with far more realistic scenarios typically experienced in foster care to effectively utilize specific skills in real-life scenarios.

The complexity of being a foster parent and the possible challenges that foster parents may encounter cannot be covered with only preservice courses. One possible direction to ensure better training for foster parents could be to develop and implement a more process-oriented course series for foster parents, as underlined by Stefansen and Hansen (2014) in their evaluation of the Norwegian PRIDE model for foster parents. The focus on “process” could take into account that both foster children and foster parents, as well as the relation between them, are continuously changing, thus providing for different needs at different time. The development of a process-oriented course series could be inspired by work that has been done, for example, in Denmark and in one of the regions in Norway, which have developed a module-based training for foster parents.[2]

In line with previous qualitative research findings (Geiger, Hayes, & Lietz, 2013; Murray et al., 2011), foster parents express a need for more support and better support from caseworkers as they navigate their role as foster parents (Murray et al., 2011). Specifically, foster parents requested more supervision and support as they dealt with the challenges of fostering and the behaviors of their foster children (Murray et al., 2011). Hence, in addition to the more standardized courses, there is also be a need for more personal follow-up and guidance for foster parents. Training and follow-up with foster parents need to reflect the diversity of individual differences, individual needs, and individual challenges of the children.

4.3. Strengths and limitations

This review could be an important contribution to the field of foster parent training, especially because it looks at the experiences of foster parents. To our knowledge, this is the first compilation of foster parents' perceptions of foster parent training. The wide scope of this review provides an overview of existing knowledge and prominent gaps in our knowledge. Strengths of this review include the comprehensive literature search, conducted independently by two researchers, and the consultation with other researchers with experience in foster parent training. Nonetheless, in line with the PRISMA guidelines, two key limitations should be addressed (Liberati et al., 2009).

First, limitations at the *study and outcome level* (e.g., risk of bias) must be considered. The sample sizes and response rates were relatively low in some of the included studies. The majority of the studies were conducted in the USA, and most of the participants were women. Of the

[2] https://www.bufdir.no/Global/Evaluering_av_prosjektet_3_delt_opplæring_av_fosterforeldre_i_region_Midt_Norge.pdf

13 reviewed studies, four were from the same research group (Delaney et al., 2012; Pacifici et al., 2005; Pacifici et al., 2006; White et al., 2014). In the reviewed studies, satisfaction with training was mainly measured a short time after the course was completed. In addition to short-term needs, further research should investigate the long-term needs, satisfaction and perceptions surrounding foster parent training. Moreover, some of the studies reported in this review include studies on the experiences of foster parents across various foster parent programs (e.g., PRIDE, Foster Parent College) and training modules. It is likely that parental needs, perceptions and satisfaction with foster parent training programs/modules could vary depending on the content as well as a wide range of other factors (e.g., parental, child and family characteristics, socio-economy, and demography). Furthermore, only two of the reviewed studies included pre-service training programs. Further research should explore if there are differences between in-service and pre-service training programs. However, some of the identified themes, such as the need for more real-life training situations and the use of flexible training formats and platforms, is likely to be applicable to foster parent training independent of the aim and scope of the foster parent training program.

Second, the limitations at the *review level* (e.g., incomplete retrieval of identified research, reporting bias) must be considered. Findings regarding foster parents' needs and perceptions of training were relatively sparse and thus somewhat difficult to synthesize. In addition, various factors, such as attendance rates, time of measurement in relation to training (when reported), were also reported using varying metrics. Furthermore, we only included studies that were published in peer-reviewed journals. This may have created a publication bias. It is possible that research on foster parent training is primarily conducted as small-scale evaluations, which often are written as reports to the government rather than as academic articles. Another potential limitation at the review level concerns the use of search terms. There could be additional articles that were not found with the current search terms. However, exploration of search terms, such as substitute caregiver, resource parent, schooling, education, practice, coaching and services did not yield additional articles. Because much of the research regarding the training of foster parents may be spread over many disciplines, relevant studies may have been overlooked. However, searching the reference lists and cited-by function of google scholar yielded a few additional articles. Based on the abovementioned limitations, the interpretation and generalizability of the current literature review must be applied with caution.

4.4. Conclusion

The review of literature has shown several points that can be applied in developing module-based training for foster parents in coming years, such as what kind of knowledge foster parents need, when the training should take place and how it can be organized. There is also good reason to harness the potential of online training to increase efficiency and give foster parents access to courses regardless of where they live. This review shows that little research has been conducted on foster parents' perceptions and satisfaction with foster parent training. This is somewhat surprising, especially since placement breakdown is a major issue in family foster care (Vanderfaeillie et al., 2018), which could also imply that giving adequate training should be a main concern. When new training modules are established, it is a good opportunity to simultaneously arrange for research on the effectiveness of training as well as the participants' qualitative experiences. Knowledge of what foster parents experience is important, because this knowledge can inform child welfare services, which in turn can develop a better knowledge base when placing the children in foster homes. Foster parents' experiences can help provide child care services with information so that they can make this process better, the result being that more children experience stable foster home placements. Future research and development of training programs should take this into account.

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Conflict of interest

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Declarations of interest

None.

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