Focus groups on empowered to connect curriculum: A review of trainer's perspectives and experiences

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ABSTRACT

There is little research on the trauma informed curriculum known as “Empowered to Connect” (ETC), while there is an abundance of research on parent education and parent training programs. The purpose of this qualitative research is to explore the perceptions and experiences of ETC parent trainers who have taught at least once in nine (9) week ETC course. Researchers sought to identify areas in which the program's curriculum could be improved, and differences in implementation, as well as opinions related to the curriculum's level of cultural competency in order to ensure that ETC is more accessible for a wider demographic of national and international families in need.

Key words: Child adoption, Empowered to Connect (ETC), parent trainers.

INTRODUCTION

According to the Child Welfare Information Gateway (2004), there were approximately 127,000 adoptions annually, with 15% being intercountry adoptions. Although several of these children are adopted into loving and stable homes, trauma has caused them to experience attachment, behavioral, and social issues. According to the study of Juffer and van Ijzendoorn's (2005), adopted children display more internalizing and externalizing behavioral problems than non-adopted children. Adopted children were also over-represented amongst those seeking mental health services in this study. These are the types of youth and families that could experience extreme healing and great comfort from a parent training curriculum such as ETC.

ETC is a nine (9) week course designed to educate foster, adoptive, kinship, and biological parents/caregivers on brain development, complex trauma, and attachment. Taught through a Christian perspective, trained instructors facilitate ways to improve parenting and caregiving skills through the use of play, homework, and in-class activities. The premise of Empowered to Connect is based on the Trust Based Relational Intervention (TBRI) trauma informed framework developed by Dr. Karyn, Purvis of Texas Christian University (TCU). TBRI informs adoptive, kinship, and foster caregivers about the skills to empower, connect, and correct children who have experienced trauma.

According to van der Kolk and Bessel (2005), when developing a program designed to treat complex trauma, three considerations including development of safety, promotion of healing relationships, and teaching of self-management/coping skills should be integrated. These considerations fall in line with TBRI’s empowering, connecting, and correcting principles. Empowering principles include addressing the very basic physical and physiological needs of the child in order to assist in the ability to perform higher level tasks. Grounded in practices of cognitive behavioral therapy, connecting principles address awareness and engagement with a focus on gaining the child’s trust. They include interactions such as playful engagement, making eye contact, recognizing behavior as a need, active listening, and being intentional about body positions and voice inflection. Finally, correcting principles are based on interactions that work to empower the child, such as proactive and redirective strategies. Proactive strategies, such as teaching emotional regulation helps the child create positive alternatives to practice when feeling dysregulated, therefore providing opportunities for growth.
TBRI has been practiced in a variety of settings including schools, residential facilities, orphanages, courts, churches, and adoptive/foster/kinship homes, and with youths of all ages from all risk levels (Purvis et al., 2013). According to Purvis et al. (2009), children who experience different forms of trauma such as abuse or neglect are more likely to be represented amongst those who develop pervasive behavioral disorders. Many of these children are at risk for social or relational disturbances resulting from their histories of trauma. Utilizing TBRI principles, ETC provides families with the tools to appropriately attach and promote healing. The ETC course is offered both nationally and internationally and is facilitated by approximately a hundred and thirteen (113) trained instructors. With the widespread experience of childhood trauma (especially those who lead to children being placed in the foster care system), it is imperative to find evidence based programs which promote trust and aid in the healing of these youths.

Unfortunately to date, few studies on TBRI have been conducted. One of such studies includes that of Howard et al. (2014) which evaluated TBRI in a residential charter school to determine whether TBRI would have an effect on students’ behavioral outcomes. Of the one hundred and thirty-eight (138) students enrolled, 49% were White, 35% were African-American, 12% were Hispanic, and 4% reported to be of other ethnicities. All students were from low socio-economic backgrounds. First year results found that students were more apt to discuss problems or issues with staffs, less likely to use profanity, less likely to engage in physical altercations (33% decrease in referrals), and less likely to be restrained than prior to the intervention. Results following the second year showed improved school culture and an overall increase in mood amongst staffs and students. Physical aggression continued to decrease (68% decrease from year one), as did referrals for verbal aggression (down 88%), and disruptive behavior (down 95%).

In a study by Purvis et al. (2013), researchers conducted therapeutic day camps for at-risk children to evaluate whether multimodal therapies would decrease the effects of complex trauma. In this study, two groups of adopted children (3-9 and 10-14 years of age) who experienced trauma each attended two separate 3-week camps. Data analysis showed a positive correlation between negative attachment behaviors and sensory processing deficits. Pre-camp deficits in sensory processing were also shown to have a significant relationship with increased post-attachment behaviors.

Although only a few studies have been conducted on TBRI principles, they have demonstrated positive results for families with children who have experienced trauma. Conversely, no study based in TBRI has been conducted on the ETC framework. Researchers set out to establish this primary phase of studies to determine the efficacy of ETC. In the second phase, researchers plan to facilitate three different focus groups consisting of caregivers who have either completed a full nine (9) week ETC parent training course, started a course but dropped out, or have never taken a course. This article details the initial phase including focus groups held amongst ETC parent trainers.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Researchers obtained the database containing emails of all registered ETC parent trainers. Trainers were invited to participate in a ninety minute web based focus group to share their thoughts, opinions, and experiences. Focus group questions were developed prior to and were based on questions researchers believed would be beneficial in order to determine whether the program was being implemented in its most logical and culturally competent way. Participants received a $20 gift card for their participation. The research was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Memphis.

Recruitment

Researchers emailed a recruitment flyer to approximately 113 trainers explaining the purpose of the study and offering two different focus group times to choose from. Times included 8 pm central time to accommodate those on the west coast, followed by a 1 pm central time session the next day. Participants were invited to email the lead researcher to participate in the study.

Procedure

Two focus groups (n=10) were held through gotomeeting.com software. Prior to, participants were emailed a copy of the informed consent and asked to review, sign, and return to lead researcher through email. Participants were emailed with instructions for logging on to the Gotomeeting software and a reminder about their scheduled date and time the day prior to the focus group’s scheduled time.

Questions were asked in a semi-structured manner and were facilitated by the lead researcher. Focus group questions were designed to elicit thoughts, opinions, and experiences of ETC parent trainers and were based on ideas thought to determine whether ETC’s curriculum was effective for families and whether its current form of implementation was the most beneficial. Questions included reasons for wanting to become an ETC parent trainer, thoughts on ways the course could be improved, and benefits trainers felt families were receiving from participating in an ETC parent training course.

Once logged on to the gotomeeting software, participants were introduced to the researcher, reminded of informed
consent details, given a brief overview of the rational for the study, and provided with the random order in which they would respond to each question (to ensure that no participant was accidentally skipped for any one question). Before beginning, researcher ensured there was a collective understanding of the purpose and the procedure of the study. Participants were asked one focus group question at a time until all participants had shared their perspectives. Following the last participant in each round of questions, researcher allowed any additional comments participants wanted to share, and thereafter, proceeded with the next question. At the conclusion of the last question’s response, participants were thanked for their participation, reminded when they would receive their gift card, and informed that researchers may contact them in the future, should they need clarification related to any of their individual responses.

Participants

A total of seventeen (17) parent trainers signed up to participate in the study. Ten parent trainers signed up to participate in the first focus group (of which 7 participated) and seven trainers signed up to participate in the second focus group (of which 3 participated). Each participant facilitates an ETC parent training course with their respective spouses and each had between 1 and 12 years of ETC training experience. Of the 10 trainers, 5 were women and 5 were men, all of whom were also adoptive parents. Racial make-up of the group included 9 Caucasian and one Hispanic participant with ages ranging from 30 to 60’s.

Data analysis

Focus groups were audiotape and transcribed verbatim. A thematic analysis approach was used to analyze the transcript data. Researcher used Nvivo software to develop matrices and organize themes for each of the focus group questions. Predominant themes were ranked in order of frequency to develop a summary of the findings.

RESULTS

Reason for teaching

Parent trainers’ reason for teaching the ETC parent training course was the dominant theme that emerged. A number of trainers cited difficulty parenting their own adoptive children and being introduced to curriculum that essentially saved their families as a main reason for wanting to become trained. For example, one trainer stated, “It saved our family because we were at the point of exploding and felt like after all these years that we labored in the darkness, no one could ever give us any good advice that ever made any difference. We felt like we wanted to pass this information on to other people and be part of the solution.” Another trainer stated, “We were really drowning in our first two placements and had a really rough road for a couple of years.” Still others mentioned being introduced to the work of Dr. Purvis, attending an ETC simulcast, or reading “The Connected Child” as the catalyst to them deciding to become ETC parent trainers. They described ETC as life changing for their families in a way that no other trauma informed curriculum had been.

Cultural competency

Cultural competency was the second most predominant theme. Parent trainers commented on the lack of diversity amongst ETC families and the need to extend the curriculum beyond those who are of the Christian faith. Trainers shared their experiences of inclusion as evidenced by statements such as, “As trainers, we have very much made it so anybody is welcome here,” and “We would not turn anyone away who wants to participate.” Another trainer indicated that she and her husband, “Are very sensitive to the fact that we have a lot of people who do not believe who are coming because TBRI works.” Others stated “We have a lot of non-believers coming which is really interesting because it is a faith based curriculum.” While a small number of trainers shared that their courses were taught in a church and that they did not have an issue with the faith based curriculum, most trainers generally shared the consensus that the program’s faith based curriculum can feel isolating towards single or same sex parents.

Delivery

A third theme included implementation and delivery of the curriculum. A number of trainers stated that online trainings should be introduced to accommodate families who are unable to attend a weekly class due to distance. Others have condensed the 9 week program in order to help deliver the material to those who would otherwise have difficulty due to family circumstances (for example, lack of child care or work scheduling complications). Others offer one day “crash courses” and/or refresher courses for those who have previously completed an ETC course. Some trainers indicated both a need and attempts to introduce the curriculum to their respective school districts, although to date not many have been successful. Others mentioned teaching the curriculum exactly as designed and having no need at this time to provide the curriculum in any “out of the box” manner.

Uniqueness of parent/caregivers families

Trainers also consistently mentioned their families. Many
indicated that their families initially feel like “They are drowning,” “They are losing hope,” and are “Usually pretty shattered” before starting the course. Some trainers reported less funding when the course and materials were completely free to families and have asked families to fund their own resources used throughout the duration of the course. More consistent turn-out and higher homework completion was experienced when this occurs. Some who live in what trainers referred to as the Bible belt have seen steady attendance and a “growing awareness” amongst families in their communities, while some on the west coast expressed patterns of families signing up for the course and although appearing to be excited, leaving the group within the first couple of weeks with little to no explanation.

**Homework**

Many trainers referred to homework as “a battle” and described how difficult it was at times to get their families to complete assignments. One trainer explained, “The homework thing has been an issue for seven years and I do not see it resolving itself anytime soon.” Others indicated that although homework is an issue, some of their families are able to convince others of its importance. For example, one trainer reported, “The homework has consistently been an issue, but it seems to just take one or two couples that are enthusiastic and then everyone else catches on to that enthusiasm.” Trainers also expressed their thoughts on how vital the homework was for families to fully integrate the material into their daily lives. “I think that it is essential to getting a full scope of what we are trying to teach. With adult education they are getting so much more from their peers than they are in lecture format. If they are able to bring back what they learn from that homework and talk about it during class, I think that might bring more value rather than us checking and grading it, and signing off that they completed it.” Trainers were split in regards to suggestions of decreasing the assignments, while some thought a decrease would be appreciated by some families; others felt it was necessary to obtain the maximum benefit of the curriculum.

**Curriculum updates**

Trainers’ response to questions related to curriculum updates suggest a desire to utilize newly published books and articles in addition to the development of a video library in which each week’s video links would be easily accessible. According to one of the trainers, “the same materials have been used for more than seven years, while there are new books and information published.” A fairly newer trainer reported that “the training process was good, but later pushed out and asked to do as it pleas us.” Similarly, others suggested “Maybe a refresher course for us to gain new ideas or to meet other trainers would be helpful.” Others described feeling that “It would be helpful to have a yearly retreat which would build relationships and rapport amongst trainers so that there is more of a community feel and support between trainers.” Other suggestions included “Having regional trainers as a contact for those trainers in a specific area so that there is one person (other than just posting on the Facebook page or emailing the ETC curriculum owners) to contact. It would be nice to have someone who knows your area to answer questions or give ideas.”

**DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this study was to understand the perspectives of ETC parent trainers as it relates to several facets of program implementation. Trainers reported a lack of cultural competency, providing variations in the curriculum to address the changing needs of their specific populations, and a passion for the program which for most stemmed from lack of resources to address hardships within their adoptive families. They expressed a desire to make the program such that it embraces families with a variety of backgrounds (single/same sex parents) and considers cultural and practical factors related to a family’s ability to complete homework assignments. Trainers cited needed improvements with the lack of centrality and accessibility of course materials such as video links and proposed that all course material be centrally located and easily accessible through a trainer library database.

The present study findings suggest that although trainers are extremely passionate and dedicated to the ETC curriculum and program, they perceive a need for improved and updated information as well as, an expansion of the population it is currently serving. Thus, future research should address ways to make the curriculum more culturally competent as a means to prevent certain demographics from feeling uncomfortable participating in this course openly and fully.

**Implications for future research**

The study findings highlight key areas for improvement as well as, implications for trainers and their caregivers. Future research on family perspectives would enhance the results from the current study as it would be beneficial to learn about the perspectives of those on the receiving end of the curriculum. Facilitating focus groups of both families and trainers’ perspectives of ETC parent trainers as it relates to curriculum and program, they are extremely passionate and dedicated to the ETC are enthusiastic and then everyone else catches on to that enthusiasm.” Trainers also expressed their thoughts on how vital the homework was for families to fully integrate the material into their daily lives. “I think that it is essential to getting a full scope of what we are trying to teach. With adult education they are getting so much more from their peers than they are in lecture format. If they are able to bring back what they learn from that homework and talk about it during class, I think that might bring more value rather than us checking and grading it, and signing off that they completed it.” Trainers were split in regards to suggestions of decreasing the assignments, while some thought a decrease would be appreciated by some families; others felt it was necessary to obtain the maximum benefit of the curriculum.

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Limitations

Limitations include the small number of focus groups (n=2) and the small number of participants (n=7 and 3) in each group. Both groups differed in the number of participants leading to the smaller group possibly feeling more comfortable sharing versus the larger group possibly feeling uncomfortable sharing in front of a larger group.

A second limitation includes the random order each trainer was given to respond to questions. The order could have had some influence on responses for later participants. For example, the last parent trainer to respond may not have mentioned certain information due to others having already discussed, or may have decided not to share certain information because those before them may have shared differing opinions.

Additionally, participants were not randomly chosen to participate from the worldwide database of trainers. Instead trainers who were interested in participating volunteered indicating a population that may have been more motivated or connected to the curriculum, which in turn may affect generalizability to other ETC trainers. Trainers were also not randomly assigned to the two focus groups, but instead chose between two dates that worked best for them. Finally, focus group recordings were only reviewed by one researcher. It is possible that different themes based on multiple evaluations may have emerged.

REFERENCES


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