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Relationships matter: Exploring the implementation of the Quality Parenting Initiative and the foster parent experience

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Abstract

Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI) is a systems reform approach aimed at strengthening the quality parenting practices of foster parents, and their support by child welfare workers. QPI has been implemented in over 80 jurisdictions across 10 states; however, no external evaluation has informed its development. This study explored perceptions of QPI's impact on the foster parent experience, with a particular focus on foster parent involvement in implementation efforts and strengthening stakeholder relationships. Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with non-relative foster parents ($N = 31$). Data were analysed through thematic analysis, and a codebook was developed to adequately capture patterns in perspectives across the interviews. Study findings indicate that QPI improved the relationships between foster and birth parents through specialized training and peer-support groups that challenged biases, articulated the roles and expectations of caregivers, and cultivated a team-based approach to meet the best interests of children in care. Foster care agencies may benefit from incorporating strategies that promote frequent, positive interactions across stakeholders. Strengthening these relationships may be the first step in reimagining the roles of foster parents in family reunification.

KEYWORDS
birth parents, child welfare reform, foster parents, implementation, Quality Parenting Initiative, stakeholder relationships

1 | INTRODUCTION

1.1 | Background

In 2020, more than 319,000 children and youth were placed in foster family homes through child welfare services (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021). High quality foster parenting is vital to ensuring the safety, permanency and well-being of children in care. Foster families provide stable living environments, where children can develop secure attachments and form trusting relationships with caregivers; all of which are needed for children's social, emotional and behavioural development. Previous studies have found nurturing and positive caregiving relationships to be associated with decreased high-risk behaviours and increased feelings of safety and well-being among foster youth (Schofield & Beek, 2009; Storer et al., 2014). Given the number of children and families served by the foster care system and the importance of caregiving environments to positive youth outcomes, more attention is needed to identify how to better support foster parents and improve the quality of foster parenting.

This paper will describe foster parent perceptions of Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI), one effort to promote high quality foster care by improving partnerships among foster care stakeholders. To understand the goals and context of QPI, we will elucidate the importance of foster parent stakeholders and cultivating positive working relationships among foster care stakeholders (e.g., birth parents, foster parents and agency personnel); and describe QPI,

including its objectives and principles, implementation components, and activities to build stronger relationships among foster care stakeholders.

1.2 | The importance of foster parent stakeholders and cultivating working relationships

To ensure effective care coordination for youth in care, foster parents must develop and maintain working relationships with birth parents, foster care agency personnel and other stakeholders. These working relationships are a critical component of successful family reunification and have been linked to birth parent and child outcomes (Nesmith et al., 2017). For example, previous studies have found that less tension between birth and foster parents during family visits correlates with increases in visiting frequency, which, in turn, is related to stronger birth parent–child attachment (McWey & Mullis, 2004; Morrison et al., 2011). The quality of working relationships between foster parents and agency staff have also been associated with foster parent outcomes, such as role satisfaction, retention and commitment to fostering (Geiger et al., 2017; Miller et al., 2019; Orme et al., 2006). Furthermore, positive communication with agency personnel, wherein foster parents feel valued and respected as members of the team, has been shown to improve foster parent satisfaction and commitment to their role (Denlinger & Dorius, 2018; Mallette et al., 2020). When examining foster parent's satisfaction with their agency, Geiger et al. (2017) found that the strongest predictors of satisfaction were having phone calls returned in a timely manner, receiving adequate information about the child placed in their care, feeling valued by the child welfare agency and being considered a part of the team. Decreases in foster parent satisfaction and commitment to foster have been linked to higher turnover rates, often resulting in more placement disruptions for children in need (Piescher et al., 2008; Randle et al., 2017). Given the role of foster parents in providing continuity of care and promoting child well-being, many child welfare agencies are keen to identify strategies to improve the working relationship among child welfare services stakeholders and ensure foster parent perspectives are valued and incorporated in quality improvement efforts.

1.3 | Quality Parenting Initiative

QPI is a systems change approach designed to expressly address the practices of foster parents and their support from child welfare workers, by helping agencies and systems incorporate best practices and policies. Participating child welfare systems (i.e., QPI sites) 'commit to fully supporting excellent parenting by putting first the needs of the child for strong relationships' (Youth Law Center, 2020) and take part in the multi-phased implementation process. The QPI implementation phases (e.g., pre-engagement, preparation, building consensus, identifying challenges and opportunities and implementation), have been described in detail elsewhere (Lewis et al., 2021). An essential component of QPI implementation involves collaboration between foster care agencies and local stakeholders (e.g., foster parents, kinship caregivers, birth parents, youth and child welfare workers) to improve the delivery of foster care by aligning policies and practices to reflect QPI's key principles: (1) consistent, excellent parenting and meaningful relationships are the most important services to child and youth in foster care; (2) research on child development and trauma demonstrates the importance of parenting and positive relationships; and (3) the individuals most affected by policies and practices are in the best position to design and implement change (Youth Law Center, 2020).

QPI builds on implementation science and decades of experience from colleagues implementing new child welfare services, some of which include incorporating stakeholders at all organizational levels— from foster parents to agency leadership and drawing on the practice wisdom of these professionals (Aarons et al., 2009; Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2008; Gopalan et al., 2021). Every site practicing QPI requires the participation of foster parents and kinship caregivers. They participate in every stage of the change process: establishing priorities, setting goals, developing new policies and monitoring the impact of those changes (Youth Law Center, 2020). QPI provides strategic consultation and organizational support by working with its stakeholders to develop an implementation plan. QPI also provides implementation and advocacy resources to support sites in their work. For example, QPI has developed guidebooks related to building partnerships between birth and foster parents, as well as organizational culture changes needed to achieve implementation goals and outcomes (Birth and Foster Parent Partnership, 2020).

QPI sites draw heavily on the creativity of diverse stakeholders to figure out workable ways to express the valuing of birth parent and child relationships and the delivery of child welfare services that is kind, conflict reducing, information-sharing and trauma-responsive. This has resulted in several site-developed QPI activities that support positive working relationships among stakeholders, some of which include comfort calls, partnership plans and improved transition planning. C*omfort calls* are arranged phone calls that are placed by the foster parent to the birth parent immediately following a new placement. These calls bring comfort to the birth parent and child, allow the birth parent to provide important information about their child to the foster parent and 'lay the foundation for a parenting partnership' (Youth Law Center, 2020). *Partnership plans* are created by foster parents and case workers at the beginning of a new placement and outline various expectations related to mutual responsibilities, such as preferred forms of communication and information sharing. *Improved transition planning* (e.g., transition from one foster home to another or from foster home to reunification) are protocols developed to ensure that children are able to build as much of a relationship with the new caregiver as possible before moving, that the stakeholders share information about the child, that services and supports be put in place before the move and that the child is able to maintain their relationship with the former caregiver after the move. Other local site-developed tools complement these most commonly used activities.

Although other existing efforts promote foster parent training and skill, QPI is unique in the intensity of its focus on partnerships. More generally, foster parents are primarily trained to understand the importance of contact and visitation, and the benefits and challenges of working with birth families (Benesh & Cui, 2017; Pacifici et al., 2005). Less guidance is provided on skills to promote shared parenting and other strategies that build trusting relationships between out-of-home caregivers and parents of youth in foster care. Therefore, foster parents may not have an explicit understanding of the range of acceptable practices of a shared parenting relationship, wherein foster and primary families are working together towards reunification. The quality of the relationship between birth and foster parents impacts family reunification outcomes. As such, it is imperative to explore strategies to engage foster parents as invested and valued caregivers, and to equip them with the skills that improve their coparenting relationship with birth parents.

1.4 | Current study

QPI has been implemented in over 80 jurisdictions in 10 states. Yet, no external research has been conducted to understand the implementation and impact of QPI. This study explored perceptions of QPI's impact on the foster parent experience, with a particular focus on foster parent involvement in implementation efforts, as well as establishing and strengthening stakeholder relationships.

2 | METHOD

2.1 | Sample and procedure

The findings presented in this paper are part of a larger process evaluation study that assessed foster parent perceptions of QPI satisfaction and usefulness; explored strategies to engage diverse stakeholders in QPI implementation; and examined current efforts to measure implementation outcomes. The study was conducted between January 2018 and August 2019. Study procedures were approved by the University of Maryland's Institutional Review Board. Study participants, comprising 31 licensed foster parents, came from three QPI sites (i.e., foster care agencies implementing QPI within the United States). Sites were purposively selected (1) to be representative of other QPI sites, (2) in various stages of the QPI implementation process (e.g., beginning, middle and end) and (3) to offer the greatest possibility of informing the design of future outcome evaluations (Table 1).

TABLE 1 QPI site characteristics

	Location	Agency type	Implementation stage
QPI site 1	Minnesota	Private	Early
QPI site 2	Florida	Private	Middle
QPI site 3	Louisiana	State	Late

A snowball sampling strategy was used. The research team relied on referrals from QPI Site Leads to generate a list of participants for the individual qualitative interviews. Additionally, we recruited participants by distributing flyers to three QPI sites located in medium-sized metropolitan cities within the United States. Interested participants contacted the QPI Site Lead and were screened to confirm study eligibility. QPI Site Leads scheduled eligible participants for an in-person interview and a research team member scheduled all interviews being conducted via video conference call. Licensed foster parents were eligible to participate in the study if they were: (1) above the age of 18; (2) English speaking; and (3) active foster parents at the time of the interview. We compensated participants with a $25 Amazon gift card. The sample was restricted to English-speaking participants due to language capacity of the research team. To understand any racial or ethnic variation in stakeholder experiences or perceptions, we asked QPI Site Leads to identify foster parents of colour for participation in qualitative interviews. Thirty-one non-relative foster parents participated in the study. On average, participants were 43 years old (SD = 14.3). Most participants were White ($n = 25$) and female ($n = 28$) and had been serving as foster parents for 5 years or less ($n = 19$). See Table 2 for participant demographic characteristics.

2.2 | Data collection

We collected data through qualitative interviews (in-person and over-the-phone). The interviewers were trained and supervised by an experienced qualitative researcher. Interviews lasted, on average, 53 min. A semi-structured interview protocol was developed to assess foster parent perceptions of QPI satisfaction, usefulness, and impact. Table 3 displays the main topics covered, with sample questions. The questions were refined throughout the first few interviews. Probes or follow-up questions were also included in the interview guide. Interview questions were developed by the study's principal investigator (first author) and an external qualitative consultant (second author). All interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed using Dedoose, a cross-platform software commonly used for qualitative and mixed-methods research.

2.3 | Analytic approach

The research team employed a thematic analysis approach (Nowell et al., 2017), 'a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within data' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.79). Due to its flexible approach, thematic analysis allows for rich, detailed, and complex descriptions of the data. The first and second authors read each transcript in its entirety and documented their thoughts about potential codes. They shared and discussed these codes over the course of two debriefing sessions. Next, a preliminary codebook, containing codes and their definitions, was developed based on the interview guide and codes that were discussed during the debriefing sessions. One transcript was then selected for preliminary coding by the first and second

TABLE 2 Interview participant characteristics

	All QPI sites (N = 31)	QPI site 1 (N = 8) %(n) or M (SD)	QPI site 2 (N = 10)	QPI site 3 (N = 13)
Gender				
Male	10% (3)	13% (1)	10% (1)	8% (1)
Female	90% (28)	88% (7)	90% (9)	92% (12)
Age	43 (14.3)	43 (13.1)	46 (13.4)	43 (14.1)
Race/ethnicity				
Black/African American	19% (6)	13% (1)	30% (3)	15% (2)
White	81% (25)	88% (7)	70% (7)	85% (11)
Foster Care experience				
Less than 1 year	23% (7)[a]	13% (1)	0% (0)	50% (6)[b]
2–5 years	40% (12)[a]	25% (2)	70% (7)	25% (3)[b]
6–10 years	28% (8)[a]	25% (2)	0% (0)	8% (1)[b]
11 years or more	10% (3)[a]	38% (3)	30% (3)	17% (2)[b]

[a]$n = 30$.
[b]$n = 12$.

TABLE 3 Interview guide

Domain	Sample question
Agency interactions	With whom (individuals/groups) do you interact with regularly at the agency?
	Probe: Please tell us about the quality of those interactions?
QPI knowledge	In your own words, how would you describe QPI?
QPI involvement	What has your involvement with QPI implementation looked like?
QPI impact	What are the agency practice and policy changes you have noticed as a result of QPI?
	Probe: What improvements have you noticed with birth parents? Stakeholders? Agency support?

authors, ensuring that the initial codebook adequately captured patterns in perspectives across the interview. They compared their coding; discrepancies were discussed until consensus was reached. This refined the codebook which included the addition of new codes, clarification of code definitions and inclusion of exemplars. The first and second authors then recoded the initial transcript using the refined codebook.

As the discrepancies between them were minimal and not code specific (i.e., the length of excerpt coded), the first and second authors expanded the analysis team to include two graduate level students trained in qualitative coding and analysis. The two students, under the supervision of the lead authors, double-coded the remaining transcripts. The full team met bi-weekly to discuss and resolve any coding discrepancies until minimal discrepancies emerged. The team then met and discussed the consolidation of codes into broader themes. Quotes were extracted from codes for each theme and then re-

evaluated to ensure they captured the meaning of themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

2.4 | Enhancements to methodological rigour

The research team sought to enhance methodological and analytic rigour in two ways: memo writing and reflexive discussions. During data collection, the research team noted new questions that might be included in the interview guide, questions that may have been unclear to the participants, potential new probes to include in the interview guide and overall thoughts, reflections and observations of the interviewer. Considering these memos, the research team regularly met to discuss how these emerging insights could inform subsequent interviews. In the data analysis phase, the researchers wrote memos on ideas or thoughts that emerged about new and existing codes, the relationship between codes and patterns emerging across transcripts. In this way, the research team used memo writing to record how they developed the codes and made decisions about coding (Birks et al., 2008).

Furthermore, researcher positionality is an important consideration as it affects how research is conducted and whose voices will be represented in the communication of results (Malterud, 2001). The lead authors are both cis-gender heterosexual women; one identifies as Black and the other as South Asian. Furthermore, most of the research team has practice and research expertise centred on the child welfare system. The research team met regularly to discuss their thoughts, opinions and feelings throughout the entire research process. These reflexive discussions help challenge biases and prevent the imposition of the team's expertise in child welfare on the data collected. Furthermore, the racial and ethnic diversity represented in the research team was useful in elevating the importance of cultural relevance of services and programming offered to foster parents.

3 | RESULTS

Findings from the interviews related to the effects of QPI on the foster parent experience and coalesced around three major themes: (1) foster parents' perceptions of and involvement with QPI; (2) enhanced foster parent support; and (3) improved birth and foster parent relationships.

3.1 | Perceptions of and involvement with QPI

Participants were invited to share their perceptions of QPI, and most foster parents shared positive sentiments. They described QPI as an effort aimed at enhancing the child welfare system to prioritize the needs of children in foster care. Foster parents commented on how QPI engages with key stakeholders to offer them standards and protocols to follow. For example, one foster parent shared:

> The way I see it [QPI] is a set of standards and values that are offered to child welfare system stakeholders, such as the counties, the department of human services, the judicial system, the judges, and everybody who has a say in the placement of kids, offer them new standards and practices that will help improve the ability to place kids in a better qualified foster home …

When speaking of the ways in which QPI incorporates foster parents in its implementation efforts, many participants shared that they became involved with the QPI at their respective agencies because the intention behind the initiative resonated with them. One participant shared that when she first heard of QPI, she exclaimed: 'What took you [the agency] so long?' Additionally, some participants shared that they became involved with QPI because of their own discouraging experiences with the foster care system, prior to the introduction of QPI. One foster parent shared: 'I got involved with it because I was desperate to make some changes so people didn't have to go through what we went through with the twins …'.

When participants were asked to share the ways in which they have been involved with the implementation of QPI at their respective agencies, participants discussed being a part of, or co-chairing, steering and taskforce committees, making comfort calls, and serving as a mentor to new foster parents. Additionally, participants described attending the annual national QPI meetings to network and learn from stakeholders at agencies who were further along in the QPI implementation process. The following participant described the value of participating in these conferences to: '… pull on the coattails of other sites who have been launched and find out what their potholes were, what kinda things to avoid, what kinda things that made them successful. We learned from that and had some takeaways'.

Participants shared that a benefit of being involved in the implementation of QPI at their agencies was the direct line of contact with agency administrators to relay their feedback and concerns. Participants remarked that agency leadership appeared to be more accessible and attentive to their needs; a shift they explicitly attributed to QPI. For example, the following foster parent shared:

> I believe that QPI is havin' an impact … they are [agency leadership is] always attending the meetings. [Agency leader] gives her opinions in the QPI meetings about different topics. With her at the leadership, I believe that those [QPI] policies are filtering down. If we [foster parents] say something needs to be changed, they are [agency leadership] actually workin' on it. I believe that, and we see it.

Despite the positive perceptions of QPI and implementation process held by many participants, some foster parents admitted that they were wary of the initiative at first. Participants shared that they feared that QPI would place more responsibility on already over-taxed foster parents. For example, one participant shared: 'I was not in favor of QPI when it was first initially introduced because I felt like it was making more demands on foster families when our foster families are already pretty stretched thin'. Yet ultimately, participants shared that QPI enabled them to understand that all stakeholders have a role in the process and that 'if everyone is on the same page, or can do their best to get on the same page for the best interests of the child, it's always the better outcome'. In fact, this mentality prompted many foster parents to become involved in the implementation of QPI at their agency.

3.2 | Enhanced Foster parent support

When asked about what sets QPI apart from previous foster care system reform efforts, many participants talked about the additional supports they received from their caseworker, their peers and other agency staff. In particular, the participants shared how the supports that they received facilitated peer mentorship, alleviated feelings of isolation and encouraged group collaboration.

3.2.1 | Facilitated peer mentorship

Foster parents reported that QPI cultivated a sense of community via peer mentoring between veteran and new foster parents. Participants shared how fellow foster parents provided them with crucial support, especially when they were new foster parents. The following foster parent described how other foster parents provided him with logistical support that helped him navigate the complexities and nuances of the child welfare system:

> The most useful thing for me has been a foster parent support group that's led by two very seasoned foster parents who work with the agency. When we go to them [seasoned foster parents] with stuff, they have managers that they work with in [the child welfare system]. They try to come to an agreement or get

resolutions for us. They will try to eliminate 200 phone calls to our workers. If there's somethin' that we're all struggling with, they'll try to spearhead it and take care of it and then come back to us with a resolution.

Veteran foster parents (i.e., those with several years of experience) described their commitment to mentoring and holding space for newer foster parents. Specifically, these participants explained that being a foster parent comes with great challenges. As such, they discussed the importance of mentoring newer foster parents through the process and keeping things in perspective for them:

I want the things that I know are minimal and trivial, let them not drive you [newer foster parents] insane, because you're gonna need the fight in you to go to court every month. You're gonna need the fight in you to write a letter to the judge. You're gonna need the fight in you to fight all the injustices that actually are big deals.

Many participants shared that agency staff, including their social workers, encouraged peer mentorship by urging them to reach out to veteran foster parents for support. One foster parent explained: 'They're [agency staff] good about encouraging new foster parents to look to the older, successful foster parents for their wisdom and knowledge'. While participants overwhelmingly expressed gratitude for the support that they received from fellow foster parents, they expressed a desire for agency staff, including their social workers, to be more attuned to their wellbeing and needs as foster parents. For example, another foster parent suggested:

They can ask us what we need. What are the things that we need, or what are the biggest challenges that we face, and how can they be of assistance? I don't think they ask that enough. I think, when we have our monthly meetings, we're focusing on the needs of the child, which is important. At that meeting, each social worker should ask, "What are your needs? What can I do for you, and how can I help you? What are the challenges you're facing, and how can I help you?"

3.2.2 | Alleviated feelings of isolation

Most participants explicitly discussed the support they received from their peers (i.e., other foster parents). Participants discussed how QPI-initiated activities created space for foster parents to come together and commiserate over their shared experiences. For instance, one participant discussed how being in the company of other foster parents, breaks the isolation they experience as a foster parent:

Just being around other foster parents, seeing a lot of people who get it is certainly encouraging, 'cause

sometimes it's very isolating as a foster parent because people in general just don't get it. The foster parents and hearing them talk, it's like, oh, wow. I'm not alone. That's always encouraging.

Participants also expressed appreciation for having the space to vent to fellow foster parents: '... [the foster parents] can reach out to each other because we are not going to vent about a staff member to another staff member'. After all, as another foster parent shared, 'these [other foster parents] are the people that understand you and what you are going through ...'.

3.2.3 | Encouraged stakeholder collaboration

Many foster parents shared that QPI facilitated collaboration among stakeholders to achieve the goals identified during QPI implementation. For example, one participant described how fellow foster parents often rally behind one another to ensure that they have access to tangible resources for their children: 'If you need more diapers, just post it on this Facebook group and all the other foster parents in the area will bring you diapers'. In addition to the collaborative efforts with other foster parents, participants remarked on the ways in which support was offered by agency staff. Many foster parents described that participation in QPI activities, such as the partnerships plans with their workers, was essential to ensuring that they were prepared and equipped with the proper resources before and during placements. The following participant shared:

They [home development workers] had to do their walkthroughs and all of that, but she sat down. She was there for a really long time, and she basically went through—we didn't know it at the time—a lot of information, but most of what we would experience with our first placement. Then once we got a placement, she came back, and she was like, "Okay, now that you have a placement and you're going through these things, what do you have questions on? Are you okay? Do you need help? What do you understand what you need to do?"

Participants also shared that due to QPI, agencies were able to offer a wider range of trainings and make these trainings more accessible to foster parents with diverse schedules. Participants revealed that caseworkers worked to accommodate their schedules regarding visits with birth parents and family team meetings. For example, the following foster parent explained:

[The agency has] been accommodating to my schedule. Both my wife and I work full-time. They [agency staff] always check with us to make sure we are available ... There is an understanding that if there's something we can't come to, [agency staff] work with all parties to try and reschedule it ...

Despite the increased collaboration among stakeholders, participants who were partnered with public foster care agencies explicitly discussed how agency level constraints (i.e., over-taxed workers), affected the quality and quantity of the support that they received. Participants cited inconsistent communication with their assigned workers and lack of information and resource sharing as indicators of agency level effects on service delivery. Despite this, participants expressed empathy for over-burdened case workers: 'The challenging part is to understand you have to wait for that time to come. You have to wait for them to get to you. They have a million requests. It's challenging to accept that sometimes'.

3.3 | Improved birth and foster parent relationships

Most foster parents, irrespective of implementation site, shared that QPI has had positive effects on their relationships with birth parents, specifically regarding communications and interactions. In fact, foster parents largely attributed these positive effects to QPI's cultivation of a team-based approach to meet the best interest of the child, from the very beginning. Participants shared that this approach led to clearer articulation of roles and expectations of caregivers, the challenging of biases and assumptions held by birth and foster parents, and open communication between birth and foster parents. The following foster parent described the team-based approach by sharing:

> QPI is basically working as a team with everybody who's involved with the child or children, especially working with the parent and having that connection to where the child can pretty much see you're on the same page. You're working together for the child, but also helping the parent as much as you possibly can.

Another foster parent added: 'We're all a team with one goal. That includes workers, lawyers, everyone'. Participants also shared that the team-based approach was facilitated at the very beginning, after a child is removed. An additional foster parent explained:

> Within the first couple weeks you're supposed to have a family team meeting where a foster parent, the worker, the bio parent, and couple other people are in one room, and you get to actually discuss what needs does the child have while they're in care. That is the prime time where you're supposed to meet the bio parent face-to-face, introduce yourself, get that tension resolved so that they know that you are not there to take their child.

Foster parents did, however, identify the need to engage stakeholders from other relevant systems to make QPI even more successful at improving child outcomes by providing a holistic perspective of the child's life. Specifically, participants recommended the judicial system, educational system, and foster care youth as stakeholder groups that need representation in the QPI process.

3.3.1 | Role clarification

Participants discussed how QPI's defining of the expectations of caregivers and communication of these expectations to all relevant stakeholders helped facilitate improvements in the birth and foster parent relationship. For example, a foster parent shared that QPI helped her birth family understand that her role is to provide them with support as they work towards getting their child back:

> They're being more receptive to me helping them and I'm not so much of the bad guy. They're able to separate I'm not the bad guy that came and took their kids from them. I guess they're realizing now more that I'm here to work with them and help them get their kid back.

Another foster parent reflected on his and his wife's experience cultivating a relationship with their respective birth mother, offering support from the outset:

> We met mom in the hospital. We were fixin' to take her son home, and that's hard for anyone. [My wife] introduced us, and she's like, "We'd like to give you a hug, and we just want you to know that we're here for you. We're gonna love him until he goes back to you. If there's anything you need along the way, you let us know." We exchanged phone numbers. We said we would send her pictures and videos. She could call us. She could FaceTime. She didn't have to just see him that one time a week for the visit. I think that definitely opened up our communication.

Providing clarification on the roles and expectations of birth and foster parents from the beginning helped reduce potential tensions and facilitated relationship building.

3.3.2 | Challenging biases and assumptions

Foster parents discussed how QPI also enabled them to acknowledge and address biases that they held about birth parents. For example, the following foster parent reflected on how her expectations of her foster child's birth father were vastly different than reality:

> We had the impression that we were just not gonna like this guy, and then we met him and immediately realized our first impression was off. We told him "You can call. You can text. You can whatever," and along the way, we maintained that. He called every night

faithfully to sing his son a lullaby. He did that for five months until [his son] went home …

In addition to challenging biases and assumptions, foster parents shared that QPI helped them appreciate birth parents' experiences and develop a sense of empathy for them. They shared that this empathy has affected the way that they engage with birth parents and that birth parents have acknowledged this shift. The foster mother referenced earlier relayed what her foster child's father shared with her:

> He said: 'I just wanna thank you because you treated me like a father. You never treated me like someone who lost his son because he was a bad guy [and] because he did these things.' He said, 'You along the way treated me like a person, and you allowed me to be his father.'

Furthermore, participants explained that QPI encouraged their efforts in providing support to their birth parents. This foster parent shared how her social worker would consistently check-in on her and her partner to inquire about how their relationship with the birth parent was progressing:

> [Agency staff] are making sure that we understand our role in it and actively engaging us and following up and saying, "Okay. How is your relationship with [the biological] dad? What would you need to make that better?" Our social worker would ask those questions. She would follow up and make sure that we were doing our part to work with the parents and have that open communication.

3.3.3 | Open communication

Foster parents shared that QPI's approach empowered birth parents to be more forthcoming with them about their circumstances and support needs, without fear of losing their child. For example, the following foster parent said:

> The [birth] mom told me that she was really happy to be working with us because all of her friends were in the drug crowd and that drug scene that she was getting out of to get her kid back. She felt like she had nobody to go to anymore because if she went to her friends, she'd just fall back into that cycle. She said that that's been a really positive thing for her to be able to have us to talk to and be able to work with us and have that person to support her so that she's not in that crowd that she was before anymore. I think that [birth parents] getting a lot more support on their end to be more receptive of us and working with us more.

Another foster parent echoed this sentiment, adding, 'Now it's like a relationship, almost a friendship, you know? I feel like that's definitely improved, I think. It's allowed for more honesty, and this bio [parent] has shared more'. Foster parents discussed how the birth-foster parent relationship often extended well beyond reunification. They explained that through QPI, birth parents view them as an additional source of support that they can call upon in the future. For instance, the following foster parent shared:

> … once that child goes home, those parents have someone to rely on. They can always come back you or reach out to you if they're in trouble. They've built that relationship. They feel comfortable so that that child is not put in danger again where they would maybe rely on you to help them out in a bind when they need it.

Ultimately, most foster parents discussed how QPI helped them realize that it is in the best interest of the child for all relevant caregivers to communicate effectively, work collaboratively, and get along. A foster parent described how children are often attuned to tensions between birth and foster parent and how this dynamic may adversely impact the child:

> If you're not open to [allowing children to speak to their birth parents], the children know it. I believe that they will begin to resent you, and you will have a harder time in your home when you are not—if a foster parent is tryin' to keep those children from their parents or just if they hear of—hear the foster parents talkin' bad about their parents, it hurts them.

It is evident that from the first interaction to post-reunification, these foster parents recognized how the approach and values of QPI had a positive impact on the relationships they build with birth parents of the children they fostered. Participants shared that QPI provided a clear articulation of roles and expectations of caregivers and cultivated a team-based approach to meet the best interest of the child. Additionally, QPI challenged biases and assumptions foster parents held, and offered opportunities to develop empathy towards birth parents.

[Correction added on 18 March 2022 after first online publication: The subheading under the results section has been updated in this version.]

4 | DISCUSSION

4.1 | Summary of findings

Ensuring the permanency, safety, and well-being of children in out-of-home placements requires quality foster homes. By centring the needs of children and their birth families, QPI shifts power away from the agency-based professionals towards foster parents to improve outcomes for children. The purpose of this study was to explore

perceptions of QPI's impact on the working relationships among foster parents, birth parents, and agency staff. QPI implementation encourages participation from a variety of foster care stakeholders, which created opportunities for more collaboration between foster parents and agency leadership. Furthermore, QPI-initiated activities (e.g., foster parent mentors and support groups) increased agencies' role in the providing of emotional and listening support for foster parents. Participants also found agency personnel and agency-led initiatives (i.e., foster parent Facebook page) to be useful for notifying foster parents of updates related to agency policies and additional concrete resources. Improvements in an agency's responsiveness to foster parents' feelings and concerns led to the perception of being supported and valued. Study findings are consistent with previous research suggesting that fostering often involves significant challenges, some of which include perceived need for resources (Murray et al., 2011; Randle et al., 2017) and navigating the child welfare system (Rosenwald & Bronstein, 2008; Samrai et al., 2011). Additionally, previous studies have highlighted the impact of the foster parent-agency relationship on foster parent satisfaction and retention (Lewis et al., 2021; Pickin et al., 2011; Whenan et al., 2009). In their study of 910 foster parents, Geiger et al. (2017) found communication to be the strongest predictor of foster parents' overall level of satisfaction with the child welfare agency, explaining 80% of the variance in satisfaction scores.

Past research suggests that foster parent engagement with and support for birth parents can reduce parental tension and alleviate fears of having a child in the foster care system (Morrison et al., 2011; Nesmith, 2013; Nesmith et al., 2017). We saw evidence of this in our study. During QPI activities, such as comfort calls and icebreaker meetings, foster parents were intentional about interacting with birth parents in a supportive, non-judgmental fashion. QPI also helped foster parents empathize with birth parents' struggles and contributed to increase efforts to communicate with birth parents. As a result, birth parents were willing to be more vulnerable about their parenting needs and challenges. Foster parents serving in supportive roles may also provide additional encouragement for birth parents to meet the requirements necessary for family reunification. Although the importance of empathy and actively sharing parenting power were previously identified as important for reducing tension between birth and foster parents (Nesmith et al., 2017), QPI sites have developed concrete activities to demonstrate these essential elements.

4.2 | Study strengths and limitations

The present study makes several contributions to the literature and has a number of important strengths. It is the first study to formally evaluate QPI's implementation process, and the unique perspective of foster parents was highlighted. We collected data from foster parents from both private and state-run agencies in various stages of QPI implementation, therefore, encompassing regional variation and strengthening the study design. Despite these strengths, study findings should be interpreted in light of its potential limitations. First, a snowball sampling strategy was used; the research team relied,

primarily, on referrals from agency leadership to generate a list of participants for the individual qualitative interviews. As a result, the participants cannot be considered representative of all foster parents at QPI sites. Study participants were also self-selected. Although this is a qualitative study with a goal to capture the subjective narrative, it should be noted that the foster parents opting to participate may share certain characteristics. Finally, a few interviews were conducted in dyads (i.e., couples). While capturing the perspectives of foster parent couples has the potential to enrich study findings, collecting data in dyads may have created conditions that influenced responses to interview questions when disagreement in perspective arose.

4.3 | Future directions for research and practice

The present study captured foster parents' perceptions about the impact of QPI on their interactions with birth parents and capacity to build effective, trusting working relationships across foster care stakeholders. Study findings represent a significant contribution to child welfare services, and highlights opportunities for research and practice. From a practice perspective, study findings suggest that foster care agencies may benefit from incorporating strategies that promote frequent, positive interactions between birth and foster parents. This relationship can be difficult to manage, and fundamental tensions between the roles of foster and birth families intensify the challenges of bringing them together to provide an understandable and positive experience for children (Järvinen & Luckow, 2020). It is usually in the child's best interest for birth and foster parents to maintain positive and supportive relationships (Linares et al., 2010); therefore, strengthening these partnerships may be the first step in dismantling the negative assumptions often made about birth parents and reimagining the roles of birth and foster parents in family reunification. Moreover, child welfare workers who are intent on helping to create such an environment may need additional tools and training on best practices for professionals to prepare foster parents to effectively engage with birth parents.

Given the well documented complexity of foster parents serving as both parental figures and professionals, the child welfare system would benefit from acknowledging and addressing the needs specific to this dual role. For example, providing training and concrete resources aligns with the professional needs of foster parents, but does little to address their emotional needs. Similar to any working environment, when positive relationships exist between foster parents and agency personnel, foster parents are more involved in the work, satisfied in their role, and encouraged to continue to foster (Lewis et al., 2021; Samrai et al., 2011). Therefore, a better understanding on how to strengthen this relationship is important and can lead to the development and testing of strategies to improve foster parent well-being and retention.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

We have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

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