

Quality Parenting Initiative: Engaging Diverse Stakeholders as Champions for Child Welfare Systems Reform

Ericka M. Lewis *University of Maryland Baltimore*

Vithya Murugan *Saint Louis University*

Megan Feely *University of Connecticut*

Kimberly A. Williams *University of Maryland Baltimore*

Michelle C. Sermon *Bowie State University*

Sumr Farooq *University of Maryland Baltimore*

ABSTRACT *Objective:* Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI) is one approach to advance foster care reform efforts by engaging key stakeholders in the implementation process. Using a participatory action approach, QPI has been implemented in more than 80 sites in 10 states. However, no formal evaluation has been conducted. We sought to identify the strategies used to engage stakeholders in QPI implementation. *Method:* This qualitative study included QPI stakeholders from a larger process evaluation study that examined perceptions of QPI satisfaction, usefulness, and impact. We conducted three focus groups with birth and foster parents, agency providers, and community leaders ($N = 37$) involved in QPI implementation. We purposively selected foster care agencies representing various stages of QPI implementation. Data were analyzed through content analysis that included codebook development. *Results:* We identified three major themes: (a) increasing inclusion in decision-making and other processes, (b) strengthening relationships and building partnerships, and (c) sharing success stories. Recommendations for sustained engagement were also captured. *Conclusions:* Findings suggest that using a participatory approach, wherein diverse stakeholders collaborate around a shared vision, can increase engagement in implementation activities. Moreover, keeping stakeholders engaged while using an iterative process that is customized around local issues may contribute to significant systems change.

KEYWORDS: child welfare systems, foster care, stakeholder engagement, implementation strategies, evidence-based practice

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Child welfare systems are charged with ensuring the safety, permanency, and well-being of children at risk for maltreatment and provide an array of services to meet the needs of youths residing in out-of-home placements.

Over the past decade, child welfare agencies have increased their use of implementation science to help achieve significant systems change to serve children and youth more effectively (Lambert et al., 2016; Sanclimenti et al., 2017; Weeks, 2021). These efforts include the adoption of evidence-based practice and policy (EBPP) to improve client outcomes (e.g., revising safety models and assessment tools used in casework practice) as well as provider- and organizational-level outcomes, (i.e., culture and climate; Armstrong et al., 2014; Landsverk et al., 2011). Essentially, EBPP implementation refers to the methods and strategies that facilitate the uptake of evidence-based practices and policies. Despite EBPP's demonstrated benefits of improving the quality of services for children and families in need, EBPP's impact may not fully be realized because of implementation failures (Aarons et al., 2011; Lambert, 2016).

EBPP implementation can be challenging for child welfare systems, as it requires the integration of new procedures, strategies, and behaviors, and larger systems often lack effective implementation processes, which can delay the delivery of effective services for children and families (see, e.g., Armstrong et al., 2014; Landsverk et al., 2011; Weeks, 2021). High-quality services are vital to ensuring the safety, permanency, and well-being of children in foster care. Given the number of children served in foster care and the role of quality implementation processes on EBPP effectiveness, it is imperative that we gain a better understanding about the factors that contribute to successful implementation of EBPPs in child welfare settings. This paper describes stakeholders' perceptions of the implementation of Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI), a systems-change effort aimed at strengthening the delivery of foster care by improving partnerships among foster care stakeholders. To understand the goals and context of QPI, we first elucidate the importance of engaging diverse stakeholders (e.g., foster parents, agency personnel, community organizations, and judicial system) in the implementation of EBPP. We then describe QPI, including its origins, principles, and activities used to engage diverse stakeholders in QPI implementation across foster care agencies.

Engaging Stakeholders in Evidence-Based Practice and Policy Implementation

Stakeholder engagement is defined as the process of working in partnership with individuals and groups seeking to address issues affecting the well-being of those residing within a community (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1997). Stakeholders can include clients, caretakers, providers, policymakers, and community members. Stakeholder engagement is multifaceted and can take many forms during EBPP implementation. For example, the International Association for Public Participation (2018) characterizes stakeholder engagement along a spectrum from informational (i.e., providing stakeholders with balanced and objective information) to collaboration (i.e., partnering with stakeholders in each aspect of the decision-making process) and empowerment (i.e., placing final decisions in the hands

of the stakeholders). Implementation science scholars have called attention to the role of stakeholder engagement in resolving challenges inherent to EBPP implementation in real-world settings, such as insufficient resources and lack of agency buy-in (Aarons et al., 2011). Previous studies have also noted the impact of stakeholder engagement throughout the implementation process, indicating that child welfare agency collaboration with external stakeholders (e.g., service partners, youth, and family) during implementation planning helps to (a) increase buy-in among workers and stakeholders during the exploration phase (i.e., preimplementation); (b) address issues that may arise during initial implementation because stakeholders have the necessary experience and knowledge to bridge the gap between the EBPP and the implementation setting; and (c) cultivate EBPP adoption throughout the organization in later stages of implementation (Armstrong et al., 2014; Triplett et al., 2021). One systematic review of EBPP implementation studies in child welfare settings (Weeks, 2021) highlighted the benefits of having diverse stakeholder engagement to increase implementation success, specifically identifying a group of people “charged with championing the implementation efforts” (p. 137). In sum, findings across studies suggest that successful EBPP implementation may benefit from more stakeholder engagement—particularly within human service systems.

The Quality Parenting Initiative

QPI is a systems-change approach designed to address the practices of foster parents and their support by child welfare workers by helping agencies to incorporate EBPPs. Participating child welfare systems (i.e., QPI sites) take part in a multiphase implementation process, wherein each site identifies the EBPP needed to improve service delivery. QPI provides organizational support by working with stakeholders to develop an implementation plan and provides implementation resources to help sites in their work. For example, QPI disseminates the State and Local Leader’s Guide to Building a Strong Policy and Practice Foundation (Birth and Foster Parent Partnership, 2020) to agency leadership and supervisors; the guide describes the elements of stakeholder partnerships and the organizational culture changes needed to achieve implementation goals.

QPI implementation refers to the multiphase process of helping foster care agencies incorporate EBPPs. A major component of QPI implementation involves collaboration between foster care agencies and local stakeholders (e.g., birth and foster parents, child welfare workers, community members, and child welfare systems) to improve the delivery of foster care by revising their policies and practices to reflect QPI’s key principles: (a) consistent, excellent parenting and meaningful relationships are the most important services we can provide to child and youth in foster care; (b) research on child development and trauma demonstrates the importance of parenting and positive relationships; and (c) the individuals most affected by policies and practices are in the best position to design and implement change

(Youth Law Center, 2020). It is important to note that each site defines excellent parenting in the context of foster care for their community (i.e., brand statement). Once developed, QPI sites use the brand statement to guide their practice and policy change efforts. For example, one California QPI site defined excellent parenting as foster parents who “. . . partner with birth families and social workers to accomplish case plans and integrate children into their homes fully, supporting children’s connections to family, culture and background. They are open to and supportive of maintaining on-going relationships with children and their families” (Youth Law Center, 2020, para. 4).

QPI also promotes cross-systems collaboration. As such, QPI works with judges, public defenders, state child welfare administrators, and local agency leaders to craft a unified effort in support of the initiative. These efforts are intended to ensure that when QPI is implemented there is consistent support for those involved. Some of these efforts have extended to legislative efforts to bring QPI principles into state child welfare codes. For example, Florida Statute § 409.1415—Parenting Partnerships for Children in Out-of-Home Care (2020)—focuses on bringing caregivers and birth/legal parents together to build strong relationships (to the extent that it is safe and in the child’s best interest) by facilitating telephone communication between caregivers as the child is placed with the foster family; developing and supporting a plan for the birth parent to participate in medical appointments, extracurricular activities, and other events involving the child; and involving the foster parent in planning meetings with the birth parent. Legislative efforts such as this may contribute to higher reunification rates for children being fostered in out-of-home care (Parenting Partnerships for Children in Out-of-Home Care, 2020).

QPI uses participatory learning and action to increase the engagement of various stakeholder groups. Participatory learning and action is a process that focuses on learning by all stakeholders, valuing diversity, and supporting group interaction. As a result, QPI sites draw heavily on the creativity of their diverse stakeholders to determine the EBPPs that will be implemented at their respective site and promote the delivery of child welfare services that are collaborative, conflict reducing, and information-sharing (Lewis et al., 2022). These principles are best demonstrated in QPI’s five-phased implementation process. Following, we expound on the various phases.

Phase 1: Preengagement

QPI leadership convenes a group of diverse agency and court staff, parents, and youth and asks them who they see as the critical members of the child welfare community that need to be at the table. This often includes providers, tribes, schools, sister agencies and parent/youth advocacy organizations. Once identified, stakeholders are invited to participate in preengagement activities. QPI leadership engages with the

child welfare community to discuss QPI, emphasizing the site leadership's role in ensuring effective and efficient implementation. To facilitate this, leadership roles and commitments are established.

Phase 2: Preparation

QPI leaders collaborate with the sites and examine existing policies, procedures, and baseline data on recruitment and retention. In doing so, QPI leaders can identify agency and community needs related to participation and execution of QPI. Additionally, QPI facilitates listening sessions that include key child welfare stakeholders (e.g., partner parents, youth, case managers, community members, etc.) to learn about their concerns and other feedback they may have.

Phase 3: Building Consensus

The QPI approach is presented to stakeholders at a launch meeting. In this meeting, stakeholders discuss the tenets of great parenting and establish core values through branding a mission statement, describing agency and community goals with a new vision of child welfare in mind.

Phase 4: Identifying Challenges and Opportunities

Stakeholders convene a steering committee to determine changes needed to align agency values and policies with the new mission statement created in the previous phase. A plan is created to address any challenges and assist in the general feasibility of the plan, and sites may form multiple groups, or task forces, to complete the work. The steering committee reports directly to agency leaders, who are ultimately responsible for supporting EBPP implementation and communicating EBPP rollout with the entire agency.

Phase 5: Implementation

This phase is ongoing, as agencies continue to ensure that agency practices align with their new values. Partnerships are facilitated to share information with other QPI sites regarding successes and challenges faced.

QPI builds on implementation science strategies to increase EBPP adoption and uptake by incorporating diverse stakeholders in every stage of the implementation process: establishing priorities and setting goals, developing new policies, implementing evidence-supported practices, and monitoring the impact of those changes. Although other existing implementation efforts promote initial stakeholder engagement, QPI is unique in the intensity of its focus on building partnerships and engaging stakeholders throughout the implementation process. In most child welfare systems-change initiatives, stakeholders are often encouraged to participate after the implementation of practices and policies (Lambert, 2016), thus limiting their ability to engage in the decision-making processes that impact implementation success (Triplett et al., 2021). Furthermore, when stakeholders do participate in implementation efforts, inconsistencies

in the reporting of stakeholder engagement activities (Proctor et al., 2013) make it difficult to understand the key factors influencing stakeholder engagement in EBPP implementation or to determine stakeholders' impact on implementation outcomes (Triplett et al., 2021).

Current Study

To date, QPI has been implemented in over 80 sites and across 10 states (Youth Law Center, 2020), all of which are in various stages of implementation; however, no formal evaluation has been conducted. An evaluability assessment to determine QPI's readiness for participation in a process evaluation gathered preliminary information on sites' implementation process (Lewis et al., 2022). Assessment findings revealed that stakeholder engagement was vital to QPI success, yet most QPI sites had no knowledge of or did not collect data during stakeholder engagement activities. Therefore, little is known about how stakeholder engagement has been initiated and sustained, nor the collective impact of engagement on the adoption of QPI across sites. This study aims to fill the gaps in knowledge of QPI's implementation process by identifying the strategies used to engage stakeholders, with a particular focus on the types of stakeholders engaged and ways in which stakeholders engaged in implementation activities. For the purposes of this study, *engagement* was defined as the extent to which stakeholders were committed to QPI and its activities.

Method

This qualitative study included QPI stakeholders from a larger process evaluation study that examined current efforts to measure QPI implementation outcomes, assessed foster parent perceptions of QPI impact, and explored strategies to engage diverse stakeholders in QPI implementation (Lewis et al., 2022). The study was conducted between January 2018 and August 2019. Study procedures were approved by the University of Maryland Institutional Review Board.

Sample and Procedures

Focus groups were conducted across three medium-sized metropolitan cities in Florida, Louisiana, and Minnesota. Study locations were purposively selected to (a) be representative of other QPI sites, (b) represent different stages of the QPI implementation process (e.g., beginning, middle, and end), and (c) offer the greatest possibility of informing the design of future outcome evaluations. Additionally, we selected sites that represented every implementation phase so findings would be applicable across the entire process (focusing on a single phase would limit the understanding of engagement throughout the intervention). Two of the study locations were private organizations with state contracts; one study location was state run.

Participants were recruited by QPI site leads, who were agency-identified coordinators working closely with relevant stakeholders to organize the launch and

implementation of QPI. As this was an implementation study, site leads invited only those involved in QPI implementation to be focus group participants. Recruited participants included foster parents, agency providers, and community leaders who were over age 18 and involved in QPI implementation. Additionally, one birth parent participated. Focus group participants were compensated with a \$25 Amazon gift card for their participation. Participation was voluntary, and all stakeholders were notified that refusal to participate would not impact services received from the agency.

The participants ($N = 37$) were mostly female (84%) and white (76%), with ages ranging from 22 to 66 years. Participants' demographic characteristics were representative of the geographic locations of the QPI sites included in the study. Most participants were agency staff (case managers and other agency staff; 62%), followed by foster parents (19%). Table 1 provides full participant demographic characteristics.

Table 1
Focus Group Participant Characteristics

Characteristics	Group 1 ($N = 15$)		Group 2 ($N = 10$)		Group 3 ($N = 12$)		All Groups ($N = 37$)	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Gender								
Male	3	20	3	30	—	—	6	16
Female	12	80	7	70	12	100	31	84
Race/ethnicity								
Black	4	27	2	20	2	17	8	21
White	11	73	7	70	10	83	28	76
Asian	—	—	1	10	—	—	1	3
Latino/a	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Stakeholder group								
Birth parent	—	—	—	—	1	8	1	3
Foster parent	1	7	4	40	2	17	7	19
Agency staff	7	46	1	10	3	25	11	30
Agency leadership	6	40	5	50	2	17	13	35
Community partner	1	7	—	—	4	33	5	13
Years of experience								
2–5 years	3	20	4	40	5	46	12	33
6–10 years	1	7	1	10	1	9	3	8
11 years or more	11	73	5	50	5	45	21	59

Note. For “years of experience,” the Group 3 $N = 11$ and the total $N = 36$.

Data Collection

Two trained qualitative researchers—the first and second authors—cofacilitated one 90-minute focus group at each site ($n = 3$) that incorporated variable elicitation to explore the factors that promote stakeholder engagement in QPI implementation. A key element of group model building, variable elicitation is a qualitative, participatory approach that recognizes and balances power dynamics and elicits diverse perspectives (Luna-Reyes et al., 2006). Group model building has been used as a strategy to improve program implementation (Powell et al., 2017) and has been applied to a range of complex problems, including homelessness and racial disparities in breast cancer treatment (Williams et al., 2018). Because focus group participants represented a diverse range of roles within the child welfare system, it was imperative to acknowledge and address potential issues associated with power differentials. For example, supervisors were asked not to participate in the focus groups if any of their supervisees were scheduled to participate. Similarly, foster parents and their caseworkers were not scheduled to participate in the same group.

The facilitators used a semistructured interview guide to lead the focus group discussions. Table 2 displays the main topics covered, with sample questions. First, participants were asked to reflect on their initial perceptions of QPI when it was introduced to their organization. Participants were then asked to reflect on their perceptions of QPI implementation at their respective agencies, noting successes and challenges that were encountered. To explore the ways in which their respective

Table 2
Interview Guide

Domain	Sample Questions
Initial perceptions of QPI	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What was your reaction when you first heard about QPI? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Probe: How was your reaction similar or different to the way you react when a policy or practice is typically introduced?
QPI implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What were some successes for your organization as you implemented QPI? • In what ways did your organization struggle to implement QPI?
QPI engagement (variable elicitation exercise)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are specific aspects of QPI that keep you and other stakeholders engaged in its activities? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Probe: What did your organization do initially to foster engagement in QPI? ◦ Probe: What do you think are the biggest differences between what they did initially and now to foster engagement in QPI? ◦ Probe: What do you think that your organization could do better to improve engagement with QPI?

Note. QPI = Quality Parenting Initiative.

agencies kept them engaged in the QPI implementation processes, the facilitators used variable elicitation. The facilitators began variable elicitation by presenting an initial question to the group: “What are aspects of QPI that keep you engaged?” The facilitators defined engagement as the extent to which stakeholders were passionate, energized, or committed to QPI and its activities. Additionally, the facilitators gave examples of both tangible and intangible variables—such as “incentives” and “sense of community”—that might promote engagement. Participants were instructed to spend 5–10 minutes individually writing down what they perceived to be important variables. The group then reconvened and took turns presenting and explaining their variables in a round-robin fashion. Facilitator 1 asked probing or clarifying questions so that each variable was clearly articulated and understood by everyone in the group. By equalizing the amount of time each individual had to talk and allowing participants to express their ideas before hearing the ideas of others, variable elicitation reduced the power differential that is often demonstrated when some individuals dominate focus groups.

Simultaneously, Facilitator 2 created a “wall” where participants’ variables were organized into themes. At the conclusion of the variable elicitation activity, Facilitator 2 explained the wall that she had constructed, including the themes derived from the variables and the discussion facilitated by Facilitator 1. Participants were asked if the wall accurately and adequately captured their sentiments, and what (if any) changes or additions they would like to make. Additionally, participants were asked for recommendations on what their respective organizations could do to improve engagement with QPI. The research team determined that three focus groups were sufficient based on recommendations from Guest et al. (2017). Guest and colleagues used data from a study with 40 focus group discussions to develop empirically based recommendations on sample sizes for focus groups and concluded that 80% of all themes would emerge within two to three groups, and 90% within three to six groups.

Analytic Approach

We used a thematic analysis approach (Nowell et al., 2017), “a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Thematic analysis allows for rich, detailed, and complex descriptions of the data. The first and second authors read each focus group transcript in its entirety and documented their thoughts about potential codes; they shared and discussed these codes over the course of one debriefing session. Next, a preliminary codebook, containing codes and their definitions, was developed based on the focus group interview guide and codes that were discussed during the debriefing session. One focus group transcript was then selected for preliminary coding by the first and second authors, ensuring that the initial codebook adequately captured patterns in perspectives across the focus group. The coauthors compared their coding, and discrepancies were discussed until consensus was reached. This process resulted in

a revised codebook that 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.

Because the discrepancies between the first and second author were minimal and not code specific (i.e., the length of excerpt coded), the authors proceeded to code the remaining two focus group transcripts. They met as needed to discuss and resolve any coding discrepancies. The authors then consolidated codes into broader themes. Quotes were extracted from codes for each theme and then reevaluated to ensure they captured the meaning of themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Enhancements to Methodological Rigor

The research team sought to enhance methodological and analytic rigor in two ways: notetaking and reflexive discussions. At each focus group, a notetaker captured nonverbal information (body language and expression) and contextual details to what participants shared during the focus group session. The notetaker also captured new questions that might be included in future focus groups, questions that might have been unclear to the participants, and overall thoughts, reflections, and observations. Considering these notes, the research team met regularly to discuss how these emerging insights could inform subsequent focus groups.

Researcher positionality is also 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 cisgender heterosexual women; one identifies as Black and the other as South Asian. Furthermore, most of the research team has practice and research expertise centered 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 helped challenge biases and prevent the imposition of the team's expertise in child welfare.

Findings

Three themes related to engagement emerged from the focus groups: (a) increasing inclusion in decision-making and other processes, (b) strengthening relationships and building partnerships, and (c) sharing success stories. To ensure confidentiality, participants are referred to here by their respective roles in the QPI implementation process, and no site locations are reported.

Increasing Inclusion in Decision-Making and Other Processes

Participants described how their inclusion in decision-making processes fostered their engagement in QPI activities. They noted that QPI promoted inclusion by creating opportunities for various stakeholder groups to be a part of discussions where important decisions were made. For example, several foster parent and community stakeholders discussed being invited to QPI meetings to discuss quality improvement

efforts with agency leadership. In these meetings, stakeholders were encouraged to provide feedback about needed improvements and strategies to do so. Several foster parents expressed appreciation for being included in the implementation of QPI from the beginning; in doing so, participants felt a sense of ownership in the process. For example, one foster parent shared their experience participating in initial meetings: “We got to meet with [QPI administrators and agency leadership] in November of last year and really express ourselves and say what was going wrong.” Another foster parent stated,

A group of stakeholders from the state department, from the counties, from different private agencies, and foster parents got together with [QPI administrator] to talk about QPI . . . We were all in agreement that we should move forward. We assembled small groups [and] committees. We came up with kick-off initiatives. We came up with strategies for how to get QPI up and running . . . It was amazing.

Additionally, participants described serving on QPI steering committees and agency work groups and discussed the unique opportunity to work with staff and leadership within and across agencies. They reflected on how the QPI process created more opportunities for birth and foster parents to be engaged in developing agency policy and programmatic changes. The following case manager shared what he enjoyed most about serving on the QPI steering committee:

. . . really being able to see everybody’s viewpoints, not just this person in a leadership role or this person over here doing case management but, okay, well there’s a licensing perspective. There’s a foster parent perspective. There’s an adoptive parent perspective, which may be different from the foster parent perspective. There’s a support worker perspective. And just having all of those different points of view, to be able to offer something to the conversation, to offer something to make things better. Because a big frustration is, you know, these mandates getting passed down to us and then, we’re sitting here saying, “Did anybody ask us if this was gonna work?”

One foster parent discussed serving on a subcommittee and how he used his relationship with local faith-based communities to create awareness about how QPI is changing their foster care system and increase the representation of racially and ethnically diverse foster parents in the community:

I’ve been involved in what’s called the racial equity committee. That’s why I said I’m a racial equity leader. What that entails is going out to different faith-based organizations within the [neighboring cities], talkin’ to them about what QPI means and how it can improve the foster care system, and encouraging people who have spare time to be a foster parent to become a foster parent.

QPI hosts an annual meeting where sites are encouraged to bring a group of stakeholders who fill different roles in the system, rather than primarily bringing higher level agency staff. The annual meeting created important opportunities for

increasing the information that nonstaff stakeholders had about the QPI process and other QPI sites. For instance, foster parent stakeholders noted the benefits of participating in regional and national QPI conferences, where they had opportunities to discuss the successes and challenges of implementing QPI. Interacting with various providers and birth and foster parents who had successfully implemented QPI was important for participants early in the implementation process because they were able to hear about best practices from the perspective of the birth and foster parents. This informed their site's implementation process, as they could determine how to incorporate and adapt these strategies in ways conducive to their specific site.

Participants offered recommendations to increase the inclusion of diverse stakeholders in decision-making processes. Because every agency identifies their path to improving the foster care system, these goals may differ greatly across stakeholder groups, ultimately impacting QPI implementation. For example, some stakeholders expressed their frustration with the differing priorities for QPI implementation across stakeholders. One foster parent stated, *"Everybody's perception is different. So, it's hard to get people on the same page."* Therefore, participants reported that more clear and consistent communication would help stakeholders to coalesce around common goals. Participants also noted the importance of check-ins by QPI leadership throughout the implementation process to improve communication and engagement. They shared that regular check-ins would offer additional support to sites, and stakeholders would be able to provide feedback to QPI leadership. One foster parent suggested how QPI leadership could make the most of stakeholder feedback, stating, *"[Get] feedback from me or other people in a much timelier manner. Because this is honestly about the first time we've gotten requests for any real feedback."*

Strengthening Relationships and Building Partnerships

Participants discussed how opportunities to strengthen relationships between birth and foster parents and build partnerships across systems (e.g., mental health and foster care) increased engagement in QPI. The relationship between birth and foster parents can be difficult to manage, and agency policies do not always clarify how this relationship can be strengthened. Moreover, foster parents are not commonly encouraged to build a relationship with birth parents, and this inadvertently sets up a negative dynamic between the caretakers most invested in the child's well-being. However, it is usually in the child's best interest for birth and foster parents to maintain positive and supportive relationships. Participants reflected that although these strong and positive relationships are atypical, one community partner noted, *"[It is] really exciting to see the foster parents and the bio parents continue a relationship postreunification."* A social worker commented that strengthening this relationship to improve the foster care experience for the children involved *"gives me a lot of energy . . . this is why we do what*

we do.” One birth parent voiced her appreciation for QPI and the lifetime bond her child has with the foster family, several years after placement. She stated,

Even today, you know like, there’s birthday parties for her other foster kids and my child goes. You know, they probably see her like once a month. So, it’s like the ongoing relationship that she gets to have with her godparents. Cause they’ve been there since day one.

Participants described the shift in emphasis from a more distant relationship between the birth and foster parents to a collaborative partnership. In addition to improvements in the birth–foster parent relationship, stakeholders also described partnership building across service sectors as a key element in the engagement process:

Getting to know the other private agencies, getting to know all the county people . . . this is what will sustain us in the future. And then what keeps us going now is the small wins. Seeing some successes from QPI, I think lighting those up in our community and getting counties on board . . . Like those are all things that make it worthwhile. That makes it like, “Oh, after two years we should keep going.” [Caseworker]

When considering recommendations for building partnerships, participants expressed that there were other stakeholders who were not engaged in their QPI processes but who should have been. Participants identified 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 implementation process. First, participants shared that judges may have a unique perspective, as they often make informed decisions after listening to multiple stakeholders involved in children’s lives. Next, participants expressed that school personnel, including school social workers, often interact with children in foster care and may have insight that is not necessarily captured with the stakeholders currently at the table. Finally, participants recommended the engagement of foster care youth. Like parent partners, some stakeholders reported that having youth partners could be a great benefit to other children entering the foster care system. Additionally, youth-partner-facilitated support groups could serve as an additional source of support to those in need.

Sharing Success Stories

Stakeholders appreciated hearing and sharing success stories about QPI implementation, all of which encouraged ongoing engagement. Several comments were made about the excitement that was shared by all when “*hearing the success stories told and then seeing it for yourself.*” It is important to note that stakeholders described decreased engagement following initial implementation of QPI; therefore, opportunities to hear and share successes throughout the process was necessary. Success stories of

small agency victories were shared within sites, whereas larger system reform improvements were shared across sites at regional and national QPI conferences. The success stories identified related to child, family, service delivery, and systems change.

Improved Reunification and Birth Parent Support

QPI can improve outcomes by changing processes that promote successful reunifications and help children develop stronger adult connections. However, achieving these distal outcomes can be time-consuming. Participants noted that hearing about small successes early in the implementation process helped keep stakeholders engaged over time. One agency staff member stated, “Really talking about the success stories, real-time success stories . . . [and] hearing those stories is what really energized me and kept me on board with QPI.” Participants insisted that being able to hear about faster and smoother reunifications of children and families that occurred as a result of QPI helped sustain engagement after initial implementation. One caseworker stated that “seeing kids be able to reunify because of the work you do” allowed her to connect her participation in QPI to better outcomes for children, which also kept her engaged in the process. An agency administrator discussed how observing successful reunification following QPI implementation aided in her continued engagement in QPI. She described how reunification best serves children:

One thing that really affected me and like being passionate about QPI was when we had a little girl who we got when she was three and a half. She did not have a secure attachment . . . like afraid of her parents and [was] shut down. But, getting to know the little girl, all she wanted to do was go back home to her parents. That's all she wanted, despite the rough start that they had. And through engaging parents with therapy and working with the child and doing all this groundwork, they've had a really successful reunification.

Additionally, stakeholders shared that seeing the increased support for birth parents following reunification aided in the continued engagement of community organizations. It is important to note that prior to QPI, this level of contact with birth parents was not commonly emphasized. One community partner described the importance of supporting birth parents after reunification:

I see an increasing number of foster parents who are a support after reunification, which is a crucial time for the parents. It's very stressful . . . you got your child back and now what? You know, they'll need support. I have many parents that are still in communication with the foster parents. Maybe sometimes they even babysit for a couple of hours . . . The number of foster parents that remain as support for biological parents after reunification is really going up, too.

Improved Foster Parent Outcomes

Hearing and sharing stories related to improved foster parent experiences also aided in QPI engagement. Several stories were shared about improved foster parent

outcomes, including satisfaction with foster parent training and supports, efficacy in their foster parenting role and responsibilities, and the foster parent–agency relationship. For example, when discussing factors impacting his engagement in QPI, an agency supervisor stated,

It's the feedback that I get regularly from our foster parents, talking about how much of a benefit QPI has been. And, really because of the differences in the relationship between foster parents and our agency . . . and that all is a result of QPI.

Stakeholders discussed attending the QPI national conferences, where exchanges of success stories are common. When asked about the components of the conference that fostered engagement, one caseworker responded,

. . . sharing foster parent stories. Personally, that energizes me, just hearing [stories] . . . and then we keep sharing the vision. What's your why? Why QPI? Why do we do it? Who does it serve?

Stakeholders appreciated opportunities to discuss successes with other agencies implementing QPI because it reinforced their shared vision for quality care for children placed in foster care. They also reported that sharing stories improved stakeholder engagement because it allowed for more positive perceptions of foster parents. One foster parent noted,

There's not just the negative [perception of], "Oh, they're in it for the money." I feel like we are slowly changing the conversation to be, "There are issues, but these are some news articles about foster parents that are doing a bomb job." I mean, that's really exciting to change the media's perspective, change the community's perspective on foster care.

Improved Foster Care System

Finally, stakeholders expressed feelings of hope when hearing about QPI implementation and the incremental changes occurring at their agency as well as other QPI sites throughout their foster care system. Stakeholders reported that agencies' practice and policy changes were major contributors to improved agency functioning and were often highlighted as a contributor to improved stakeholder engagement. For example, an agency staff member described their increased engagement as a result of hearing updates on the agency's quality improvement efforts:

I take the notes for the steering committee, so it was just hearing about the progress. You know, hearing that, okay, we got our idea. We're throwing our solutions out there. We've narrowed down what we're gonna do. Now, we're gonna implement it. . . . and it was like, "Wow, this really works. They're following this plan, and they're actually getting things done."

In fact, parents and agency staff agreed that sharing stories about improved outcomes for children and families reinforced the benefits of QPI as well as the need for stakeholder participation. This overall sentiment was summarized with one agency provider's statement:

I think we [were] certainly seeing increase[s] in kids entering care and a shortage of foster parents . . . it's a crisis. QPI created an opportunity to rebrand and reenergize and reorient how we see and work with foster parents. I think the energy to bring foster parents and birth parents together really helps to promote better outcomes for kids.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore strategies to engage diverse stakeholders in QPI implementation. Study findings demonstrate that when various stakeholders—especially those who are typically excluded from the process—take part in planning and executing reform, they are engaged participants. Treating stakeholders as essential partners gave them a “seat at the table” where unique perspectives were represented and appreciated. Similar findings were reported in a study of essential engagement components, which identified the importance of inclusion of diverse voices (independent of their role within the organization) for meaningful change (Norris et al., 2017). In our study, foster parents expressed optimism about their new roles, which was in contrast to prior reform efforts where they were not included and their perspectives were not solicited. Stakeholders reported that when they were invited to participate, they felt a sense of ownership of the process, further strengthening their commitment to ensuring successful implementation of QPI. This supports the need for more coordinated collaboration and other participatory learning approaches across stakeholder groups to improve EBPP implementation (Beidas et al., 2016; Leffler et al., 2023; Scaccia et al., 2015).

This study's findings highlight specific stakeholder recommendations that agencies can incorporate to include stakeholders closest to system-reform work. In the case of QPI, participants suggested that implementation efforts continue to promote inclusion by establishing clear and consistent communication across stakeholder groups and increasing the diversity of stakeholder representation (e.g., judicial system and foster youth). Using a participatory approach for quality improvement and system reform is fundamentally different from the approaches most-often used in the foster care system (e.g., little to no key stakeholder perspectives), which have not achieved the hoped-for success. QPI's approaches are consistent with participatory action and knowledge translation research that has demonstrated that implementation informed by various types of knowledge and perspectives is more effective than implementation driven by any one group of stakeholders (Nutley et al., 2007; Rushmer et al., 2019). This suggests that a participatory action approach with multiple types of stakeholders involved could be a successful strategy for EBPP implementation (Lewis et al., 2022).

Study findings also indicate that hearing and sharing success stories was a useful engagement strategy used by agencies at every phase of QPI implementation. In our study, storytelling allowed for less formal communication and exchanges between stakeholders and more opportunity for information sharing. Storytelling in social work, education, and urban planning research enables diverse communities to identify commonalities and join in collective efforts to implement community-based solutions and cultivate resilience (East et al., 2010; Taylor & Wei, 2020). In sharing their stories, people in communities build deeper connections to others in the community, establish trust, and authentically communicate vulnerabilities. Further, storytelling empowers marginalized populations and brings visibility and inclusivity to their voices in research (Francis & Roll, 2015; Vakalahi et al., 2014). Similar findings on the relationship between storytelling and stakeholder engagement has been found in health promotion literature (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2007) and applied in behavioral interventions as a strategy to overcome resistance to changes and information processing (see, e.g., Houston et al., 2011; Kreuter et al., 2007). In QPI, success stories—particularly those that illustrated improved outcomes for children—helped overcome resistance related to perceived lack of self-efficacy. Reducing this resistance and providing some hope that positive change could occur facilitated their continued engagement in QPI implementation and is important to consider for the implementation of EBPP within large service systems such as child welfare.

Strengths and Limitations

This study makes several contributions to the literature and has a number of strengths. QPI is the only participatory organizational change intervention that is being applied to foster care services, and this is the first formal evaluation of QPI. This study also collected data from multiple sites in different phases of the QPI intervention, strengthening the design and increasing generalizability of the findings. Power dynamics are rarely discussed in child welfare systems. This study, and the QPI process, were designed to acknowledge those differentials so that all stakeholder voices were included and valued. The variable elicitation approach accounts for power differentials in qualitative data collection that may substantially bias what participants are willing to share. As the variable elicitation process unfolded, a facilitator constantly checked with the participants about whether the visual of their statements (i.e., the wall) accurately captured what the participant intended. This not only helps to dampen power dynamics among participants, but it also shifts power away from the researchers because the first steps of interpretation and analysis are led by the participants.

Importantly, this study identifies inclusive and participatory strategies that have been successful in child welfare and could be applied to reform efforts in other child welfare systems. By centering the needs of children and their birth families, QPI shifts power away from the agency-based professionals toward foster parents to

improve outcomes for children. These study findings improve understanding of the aspects of the process that have supported QPI's success and can be used to refine the implementation of QPI to improve engagement. Furthermore, the success of this approach has broad implications for child welfare reform.

This study should be interpreted in light of two potential limitations. First, we used a snowball sampling strategy, relying on referrals from agency leadership to generate a list of potential focus group participants. As a result, the participants cannot be considered representative of all stakeholders involved in QPI implementation. Second, although the design tried to encompass the range of implementation stages, state-run and nonprofit organizations, and regional variation, the sample was limited to three sites. Including additional sites may further strengthen the application of findings in other jurisdictions.

Implications for Research and Practice

Research has shown that successful implementation of EBPPs requires stakeholder engagement (Lobb & Colditz, 2013; Salloum et al., 2017). To date, QPI is one of the first initiatives to advance foster care system-reform efforts by engaging diverse stakeholders in the implementation process. The present study's examination of strategies to engage diverse stakeholders in the implementation process represents a significant contribution and highlights opportunities for research and practice. First, using a participatory approach wherein diverse stakeholders are collaborating around a shared vision can increase engagement in implementation activities. Stakeholders shared how encouraged they felt about the possibility of success when they participated in workgroups with other stakeholders, such as elected officials, foster parents, and case workers. Their perception of equal participation in collectively working toward a common goal indicated to traditionally marginalized stakeholders that this reform effort was different than prior efforts and that there was a shared commitment across stakeholder groups to improving foster care. Using narrative or storytelling to share stakeholder experiences, communicate successes, and educate professionals has been successful in public health, and these findings suggest such approaches could also be beneficial in the child welfare system (Tsui & Starechski, 2018). Using stakeholder voices to share stories about the QPI process and successes—particularly from foster parents, birth parents, and case workers—may have significant benefits in initiating and sustaining engagement in reform efforts. Future studies should examine the role of engagement in the process of aligning child welfare system reform goals across key stakeholder groups. Additionally, advancing methods to capture stakeholder perspectives is essential for community partnerships and implementation science (Lewis et al., 2022; Salloum et al., 2017). To facilitate this, researchers have been developing short, quantitative measures for use with participatory research that capture domains such as relational dynamics (Oetzel et al., 2015). These measures can be

administered at different stages of the participatory process to understand participant experiences and perspectives. Measures such as these can also be incorporated into interventions to provide a more consistent assessment of involvement across stakeholder groups.

Second, building and sustaining engagement throughout the implementation process is important. Study findings suggest that being invited to participate in agency decision-making processes and sharing success stories were vital to stakeholders' initial and continued engagement. Given that successfully implemented programs result in better outcomes for clients, more research is needed to identify the components that aid in initial and sustained engagement throughout the implementation process.

Third, engaging diverse stakeholders will require acknowledgement of power dynamics and hierarchical decision-making processes that shape group norms. QPI's participatory approach shifts this power dynamic and empowers those who have traditionally had no formal power—including foster parents, birth parents, and community partners. It is important to note that this process does not create a new hierarchy but rather an inclusive process that values all participants. As a result, stakeholders in our study said they felt heard and that their perspectives were valued. This increased engagement throughout the implementation process and resulted in stronger relationships and community partnerships. Therefore, future quality improvement initiatives should explore the role of equity and inclusion in the engagement of diverse stakeholders.

Author Notes

Ericka M. Lewis, PhD, is an associate professor at the University of Maryland Baltimore School of Social Work.

Vithya Murugan, PhD, is an associate professor at the Saint Louis University School of Social Work.

Megan Feely, PhD, is an associate professor at the University of Connecticut School of Social Work.

Kimberly A. Williams, MSW, is an PhD candidate at the University of Maryland Baltimore School of Social Work.

Michelle C. Sermon, PhD, is an assistant professor at Bowie State University.

Sumr Farooq, LMSW, was a student at the University of Maryland Baltimore School of Social Work.

Correspondence regarding this article should be directed to Ericka M. Lewis, 525 West Redwood St., Baltimore, MD 21201, or via e-mail to ericka.lewis@ssw.umaryland.edu.

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