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Enhancing Foster Carers' Training and Professionalism

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for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in the School of Social Work and Community Welfare
at James Cook University

“Common sense and education are highly compatible; in fact, neither is worth much without the other.”

(Donald G. Smith)

STATEMENT OF ACCESS

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I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in any other form for another degree or diploma at any University or other institution of tertiary education. Information derived from the published or unpublished work of others has been acknowledged in the text and a list of references is given.

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Date

STATEMENT ON THE CONTRIBUTION OF OTHERS

I would like to acknowledge the contribution of the Queensland Department of Child Safety for providing me a generous PhD scholarship, the equivalent of my full time wage, and providing in-kind support to me throughout the duration of this research study. This support enabled me to focus my efforts and complete the research, for which I am truly grateful.

I would also like to acknowledge and thank Diane Westerhius who provided me with valuable statistical support enabling me to rigorously analyse research data.

Also, I wish to acknowledge my supervisor Professor Rosamund Thorpe for her commitment to and support of me throughout the duration of this research and also for the high level and quality of academic supervision which she provided me throughout the undertaking of this research.

DECLARATION ON ETHICS

The research presented and reported in this thesis was conducted within the guidelines for research ethics outlined in the *National Statement on Ethics Conduct in Research Involving Humans* (1999), the *Joint NHMRC/AVCC Statement and Guidelines on Research Practice* (1997), the *James Cook University Policy on Experimentation Ethics, Standard Practices and Guidelines* (2001), and the *James Cook University Statement and Guidelines on Research Practice* (2001). The proposed research methodology received clearance from the James Cook University Experimentation Ethics Review Committee (approval number H1340).

Anne Marie BUTCHER

Date

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This research would not have been possible without the willingness of the foster carers and other key informants who so freely gave of their time, thoughts, opinions and views in this study. They allowed me to enter their homes or places of work and talk candidly about a field of work which often evokes strong views and emotions. To all of the research participants I extend my sincere gratitude and appreciation to you, for without your contribution this research would not have been possible.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis reports on a study of the adequacy and appropriateness of current education and training for foster carers. The study utilised a multi-method research design to collect, collate and analyse data from foster carers, social science experts and 'other key informants'.

The research first identified the existing educational attainment levels of foster carers in the Mackay Whitsunday region of North Queensland and the extent of foster carer training undertaken by them. The study then explored the barriers and incentives to foster carers' attendance at training, and foster carers' own perceptions of their learning needs and preferred modes of foster carer training delivery. Areas in which foster carers seek to be better supported while fulfilling their fostering role were also identified.

Having examined the adequacy of current education and training, the views of all participants were then sought regarding ideal foster carer training qualification levels and content areas that would best assist carers to provide high standards of good quality care to children placed in foster care.

Several major findings emerged during the course of data analysis relating to foster carers' recognition of their need for accredited training, trends towards the professionalisation of foster care with commensurate payment for undertaking this work.

Indigenous and Australian South Sea Islander foster carers' views were also taken into consideration and their unique cultural perspectives, in regard to the topic of this research, are reported in this thesis. One of the main findings in relation to Indigenous foster carers is their desire for improved working relationships with Department of Child Safety officers.

In conclusion, recommendations are made to the Department of Child Safety based on the findings of this research, for areas in which improvements should be made to Departmental policy and practice concerning foster carer training, accreditation, professionalism, payment and support.

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PROLOGUE

As with the undertaking of any large project which tends to take on a life of its own (or take over one's life) this doctoral research has not been different in this regard. The writing of this thesis has presented some unique challenges given the current rapid rate of change within the child protection system in Queensland, particularly over the past twelve months. At times it has seemed as though the thesis' socio-political context had a foundation built on 'shifting sands'.

From the commencement of this research and over the past four years in Queensland the Department with responsibility for the care and protection of children has been renamed four times and by the time this thesis is complete there will be yet another with the previous Queensland Department of Families (QDoF) effectively being split into two separate Government Departments with one, the Department of Child Safety, taking carriage of child protection matters and the other, the Department of Communities, taking responsibility for community funding and resourcing of prevention and early intervention services relating to child, families, youth justice and the broader community. Additionally, at the commencement of this study, front line child protection workers in Queensland were known as Family Service Officers (FSO) however, towards the finalisation of this thesis their positions have been renamed Child Safety Officers (CSO).

To ensure that this thesis is as current and accurate as possible the correct Departmental names and staff position titles have been used as accurately as possible within the respective timeframes of their existence.

Another deliberate and notable feature of this thesis is wherever Indigenous people are referred to the word 'Indigenous' begins with a capital letter, in doing so this is the accepted way of indicating a mark of respect for Indigenous Australian people and should not be confused as a grammatical error.

In conclusion, my hope is that this research will form another stepping stone in the development of social welfare knowledge in striving to improve the quality of care and the lives of children in foster care.