A QUALITATIVE STUDY EXPLORING FEDERAL EDUCATION POLICY
IMPLEMENTATION IN CHILD WELFARE AGENCIES

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Abstract

The 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was signed into legislation to increase educational stability for youth in care through increased partnership and collaboration between child welfare and educational agences. This qualitative study explored the critical factors that impact the efforts of child welfare agencies (CWA) to implement ESSA. The general systems theory and Edwards' policy implementation model were used to guide the study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight individuals from the Texas Department of Family Protective Services, and a focus group was conducted with six representatives from Region 10 Texas Education Agency. A thematic approach was taken to analyze participant responses and identify key themes in the data. Six core themes highlight leadership, resources, training, communication, collaboration and accountability, and politics and finances. A thorough discussion of the findings is presented. The study provided theoretical and practical implications suggesting CWAs take notice of the importance of leadership influence and develop systematic interventions to aid in implementation efforts.

Keywords: agency collaboration, child welfare, education legislation, financing, foster youth, and policy implementation

Dedication

I watched a movie recently called "We Grown Now," depicting the life and struggles of two young boys growing up in the projects of Chicago. The young, school-aged boys often talked of their dreams, goals, and aspirations. There was one line in the movie where the single mother was speaking to her mom about a job opportunity that she was afraid to take because of the impact it would have on her kids. The woman's mother told her," If you don't grow, they don't grow. That line stuck with me. As a single mother, it's hard raising kids, especially an African-American teenage boy, because you question every move that you make, wondering if it's the best thing for your kids and how it will impact them. While this degree has my name on it, it's really for them. This doctorate is for my kids…biological, adopted, and foster… for every child that I encounter, whether in my home or not, to feel like they too can achieve anything they put their mind to. However, I give special thanks to my son, Aaron, and my daughter, Malaysia, for their patience with me as I wrote on the weekends, school breaks, and holidays, limiting their fun. Thank you for loving me despite the tireless nights and long weekends.

Acknowledgments

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways

acknowledge him and he will make your path straight" – Proverbs 3:5-6

This dissertation could not have been completed without my committee's support, encouragement, and guidance. To my subject matter expert, Dr. Lori Salgado, thank you for your thoroughness and expertise in the field. You never failed to keep me on point. To Dr. Yuerong Sweetland, thank you for keeping me honest and always making sure my methods were in line. To my faculty advisor, committee chair, co-author, mentor, and friend, thank you for staying on top of me and always pushing me to strive for greater even when you don't realize you do it. This journey has definitely brought us closer, and I have appreciated every moment of having you as my advisor, mentor, and caring friend. To Dr. Jerry Roberson, my life coach, friend, and everything else that I need him to be. Like you always tell me, "You rock," I can only aspire to be half as great as you in this life, but I will continue to try. Thank you for always being supportive no matter what and pushing me beyond my boundaries.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Child welfare agencies (CWA), responsible for the protection, well-being, and support of children, operate within a complex framework of federal guidelines, regulations, and funding mechanisms (DeVooght & Cooper, 2012; Doyle et al., 2022; Feely et al., 2020; Testa & Kelly, 2020). Additionally, CWA policies across the United States are shaped by federal legislation (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013; Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2018; Feely et al., 2020). Since the federal government's Social Security Act of 1935, there has been significant federal impact on the services and outcomes provided to vulnerable children and families in need (Children's Defense Fund, 2018).

More specifically, federal education legislation, such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 and, more recently, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015, has direct implications on the educational trajectory of youth involved in child welfare services (Long, 2019; Williams, 2019). Understanding the effects of federal legislation and policy implementation in CWAs is vital for enhancing educational outcomes and improving the overall welfare of children in foster care (Gustavsson & MacEachron, 2018; Long, 2019; Williams, 2019).

Background of the Study

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) Children's Bureau, child welfare is defined as "a continuum of services designed to ensure that children are safe and that families have the necessary support to care for their children successfully" (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2018, p. 1). The agencies and organizations that comprise the child welfare system work toward a single mission of "promoting the safety and well-being of children and their families" (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013, p.1). Historically, the

responsibility for child welfare policies has remained at the state level with limited involvement from the federal government. In direct alignment, federal funding opportunities for child welfare-focused initiatives have increased but require ownership, oversight, and accountability at the state level (Bald et al., 2022; O'Neill-Murray & Gesiriech, 2004).

Formal child welfare structures include oversight from the DHHS. Drilling down to the state level is where child welfare availability, delivery, and practice begin to differ. The DHHS, Administration for Children and Families (ACF), and the Children's Bureau maintain federal legislation and the requirements by which state-level agencies must adhere to receive federal funding for foster care programs. However, states are responsible for compliance with federal and state requirements for administering child welfare services (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2018; Rymph, 2017).

An example of federal education legislation addressing educational challenges of foster youth is ssen via ESSA. Reauthorization and modification of the original ESEA took place in 2015 through the adoption of ESSA. The passing of ESSA in 2015 authorized provisions that complement those developed as part of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (Fostering Connections Act or FCA) of 2008 but expanded the responsibilities and requirements for collaborative efforts between state education agencies (SEAs) and CWAs to further ensure educational stability for foster youth. There were no new requirements for the entities, but there was an expectation with ESSA that joint decision-making and collaboration would be enhanced (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). The legislation required shifts in processes and collaborative efforts from entities that serve youth in order to see changes in educational outcomes for foster youth. The provisions of ESSA were to be implemented by December 2017; however, as of the annual report card for the academic year 2021-2022, some

states, such as Georgia, provide no record of academic performance indicators for the foster

youth subgroup (Governor's Office of Student Achievement, n.d.). Despite federal requirements

for reporting, there is no authority to monitor implementation (Williams, 2019).

Williams (2019) examined ESSA from the implementation perspective within a child

welfare system. Understanding the social context within child welfare is critical to implementing

organizational changes, including service delivery, which often comes with new policy

implementation requirements (Glisson, 2007). Leaders must understand the nuances of

organizational social context (OSC) that contribute to or impede the effectiveness of

implementation, execution, and organizational outcomes (Glisson, 2007). As such, gaps exist in

exploring factors impacting the implementation efforts of ESSA and the associated outcomes for

youth in foster care.

Statement of Problem

Inconsistencies in policy implementation among CWAs can significantly impact the

educational trajectory of foster youth (Chibnall et al., 2003; U.S. Department of Health and

Human Services Children's Bureau, n.d.). The lack of uniformity in policy execution can lead to

various challenges and inequities in the educational experiences of foster children and have

significant impacts on the educational trajectories of foster youth, such as disruption of

schooling, lack of support, and reduced educational attainment (Cox, 2013; Fletcher, 2020;

Gustavsson & MacEachron, 2018). Despite various legislative efforts to increase academic

outcomes for foster youth, there is limited evidence of success, primarily attributed to the lack of

available educational data specific to this population (Day et al., 2014; National Working Group

on Foster Care and Education, 2018). Despite intentional legislative efforts to address the

growing concerns pertaining to the educational trajectory of foster youth and encourage

collaboration among the agencies serving this population, the lack of success with past legislative efforts suggests that existing policies and practices may not be effectively addressing the educational needs of this vulnerable population (Day et al., 2014; Noonan et al., 2012). There is an evident need for further investigation into the contributing factors influencing policy implementation at the state level, including a critical review of existing legislative measures' effectiveness in improving foster youth outcomes (Williams, 2019; Long, 2019).

Purpose of the Study

This study aimed to understand critical factors that influence the implementation of federal education legislation at the state level, specifically ESSA, whose downstream effects from effective or ineffective implementation ultimately impact foster youth educational success (Long, 2019; Williams, 2019). Through this qualitative study, critical factors influencing policy implementation and the perceptions of collaboration related to implementation were explored through semi-structured interviews with stakeholders from the Texas Department of Family Protective Services (TX DFPS) followed by a focus group with stakeholders from Region 10 of the Texas Education Agency (TEA).

Research Questions

The critical factors that contribute to the implementation of ESSA were examined through a qualitative study aimed at answering the following research questions:

RQ1: What are critical factors impacting the implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) between the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (TX DFPS) and education professionals in school districts within Region 10 of the Texas Education Agency (TEA)?

RQ2: What are the experiences of stakeholders (i.e., caseworkers, supervisors, program managers, and administrators) within the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (TX DFPS) concerning collaboration in relation to the implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)?

RQ3: What are the experiences of stakeholders (i.e., teachers, counselors, and principals) within Region 10 Texas Education Agency (TEA) concerning collaboration in relation to the implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)?

Key Literature

Key literature contributing to the evolution of child welfare, pertinent legislation, educational challenges faced by foster youth, and child welfare organizational readiness for change, including key factors impacting the implementation of new policies is presented below.

Evolution of Child Welfare at the Federal Level

Public CWAs are often managed at the state level, with each state responsible for overseeing and investigating cases of child abuse and neglect. However, public CWAs do not make up the entirety of the child welfare system. A single entity does not manage the child welfare system. Public and private state-based child placing agencies (CPAs) work together in managing the responsibilities of child welfare, which often include:

- Support or coordination of services to prevent child abuse and neglect.

- Provide services to families that need help protecting and caring for their children.

- Support the well-being of children living with relatives or foster families, including addressing their educational needs.

(Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2018, p.1)

The signing of the Social Security Act (SSA) of 1935 by President Franklin D. Roosevelt marked the beginning of federal legislation bringing attention and resources to child welfare in the United States (Oettinger, 1960). Historically, states have been responsible for their child welfare policies with limited federal government involvement in child welfare practices. However, as federal funding opportunities have increased, an alignment with new legislation has aided federal agencies in placing greater ownership and accountability on states (O'Neill-Murray & Gesiriech, 2004). Some of the significant legislation influencing current-day child welfare include but are not limited to:

1. 1974: Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act

2. 1980: Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act

3. 1993: Omnibus Reconciliation Act

4. 1997: Adoption and Safe Families Act

5. 2003: Keeping Children and Families Safe Act

6. 2018: Family First Prevention Services Act

Formal child welfare structures include oversight from the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). Drilling down to the state level is where child welfare availability, delivery, and practice begin to differ. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), and the Children's Bureau maintain federal legislation and state-level agencies' requirements to receive federal funding for foster care programs. While most states employ a centralized, state-administered child welfare system, several states, including California, Colorado, New York, and North Carolina, utilize a county-administered model (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2018). Child welfare services are

decentralized in county-administered systems, with individual counties responsible for implementing state-level policies and practices (Storey & Fletcher, 2023). Despite the significant impact of organizational structure on service delivery to vulnerable children, this aspect of child welfare administration often receives insufficient attention (Blome & Steib, 2014, p. 624).

The variance in state-level social well-being outcomes of youth served by child welfare agencies is evidence that current organizational structures and practices at the state and county levels may not be best suited to address the myriad of directives that child welfare must achieve (Blome & Steib, 2014).

Federal Education Legislation That Impacts Foster Youth

ESSA (2015) is one example of federal policy addressing some of the educational challenges of foster youth. Reauthorization and modification of the original ESEA of 1965 took place in 2015 through the adoption of the ESSA. Initially designed to address educational disparities, ESSA funded schools with increased rates of low-income students (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015; Long, 2019). In 2008, the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (Fostering Connections Act or FCA) addressed the educational instability of foster youth by recognizing the need for collaboration between CWAs and Local Education Authorities (LEAs) in maintaining educational stability by allowing children to remain at their current school despite placement changes if remaining at the home school is for the best interest of the child (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). The FCA also required CWAs to ensure that children who did have to move schools due to placement change were enrolled in the new school expeditiously and with the appropriate documents needed for enrollment (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). The passing of the ESSA in 2015 authorized provisions that complemented those developed as part of the FCA but expanded the responsibilities and requirement for

collaborative efforts between SEAs and CWAs to further ensure educational stability for foster youth. There were no new requirements for the entities, but there was an expectation with ESSA that joint decision-making and collaboration would be enhanced (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). The ESEA and ESSA require shifts in processes and collaboration from the entities that serve youth to see changes in educational outcomes for foster youth. Provisions of ESSA were to be implemented by December 2017; however, states such as Georgia provide no record of academic performance indicators for the foster youth subgroup (Governor's Office of Student Achievement, 2021-2022). Despite federal requirements for reporting, there was no authority to monitor implementation (Williams, 2019).

Studies completed by researchers Long (2019) and Williams (2019) addressed ESSA, providing a testament to the legislation's importance in fostering educational success for youth. Long (2019) evaluates ESSA from the perspectives of leader interpretation and how such interpretations influence subsequent responses. Williams (2019) examines the ESSA from the implementation perspective within a child welfare system. Researchers Day et al. (2015), Gustavsson and MacEachron (2018), and Morton (2016) identify the importance of and need for agency collaboration. However, gaps exist in exploring the relationship between the implementation efforts of the ESSA and educational outcomes for youth in foster care.

Policy Implementation

Many challenges often occur as organizations look to implement policy (Mthwthwa, 2012). Understanding the dimensions of policy implementation aids in assessing overall implementation success. Analyzing policy implementation and the factors contributing to implementation helps uphold accountability, increase effectiveness, and promote quality (Mthwthwa, 2012).

Organizational Readiness for Change. Understanding the social context within child welfare is critical to implementing organizational changes, including service delivery, which often comes with new policy implementation requirements (Glisson, 2007). Leaders must understand the nuances of OSC that contribute to or impede the effectiveness of implementation, execution, and organizational outcomes (Glisson, 2007). Researchers McCrae et al. (2014) recommend that leaders create a change model that helps to frame strategies and calls out key aspects that participants should be mindful of during implementation, including collaboration with other stakeholders. CWAs are large, multifaceted organizations that require participation, knowledge, and communication from all members to adopt change that impacts the outcomes of the clients served (Long, 2019; McCrae et al., 2014).

Agency Collaboration. Research suggests that supporting foster youth from the perspectives of child welfare, education, and judicial systems, and the communication and collaboration among the agencies are critical to promoting educational success (Day et al., 2015). Agency representatives must understand the importance of their role as a contributing factor to the academic success of foster youth (Day et al., 2015; Morton, 2016). Despite knowing that educational outcomes for foster youth are significantly less than other student groups, child welfare alone only indirectly addresses the needs of foster youth to change educational outcomes (Gustavsson & MacEachron, 2018). Multilevel engagement from all stakeholders, including CWAs, state and local educational agencies (SEAs and LEAs), educators, and foster parents, is critical to positively impact outcomes for this disadvantaged population (Gill & Oakley, 2018; Gustavsson & MacEachron, 2018; Morton, 2016).

Educational Challenges Faced by Foster Youth

Many researchers have concluded that foster youth are at risk of poor academic performance compared to their non-foster peers (Berardi & Morton, 2017; Morton, 2015; Pears et al., 2018; Vacca, 2008). Youth in foster care often experience variables such as the "inability of schools to meet the complex needs of special education accommodations and lack of consistent, collaborative support among those close to foster youth" that lead to diminished educational outcomes (Fletcher, 2020, p. 1).

Trends in the literature suggest key factors that play a significant role in the educational achievement of foster youth such as trauma-informed educational approaches, availability of educational support resources, and collaboration of child welfare and educational professionals (Berardi & Morton, 2017; Day et al., 2015). Day et al. (2015) identified significant implications for foster youth educational outcomes related to the lack of communication among the various support groups and systems that support youth, including child welfare, education, caregiver(s), and courts.

The model presented in Figure 1 illustrates the interconnected nature of early adversity, educational challenges, and long-term outcomes, highlighting the need for comprehensive, sustained support for children in the foster care system to help break the cycle and improve their educational prospects.

Figure 1

Factors Impacting Educational Outcomes for Foster Youth
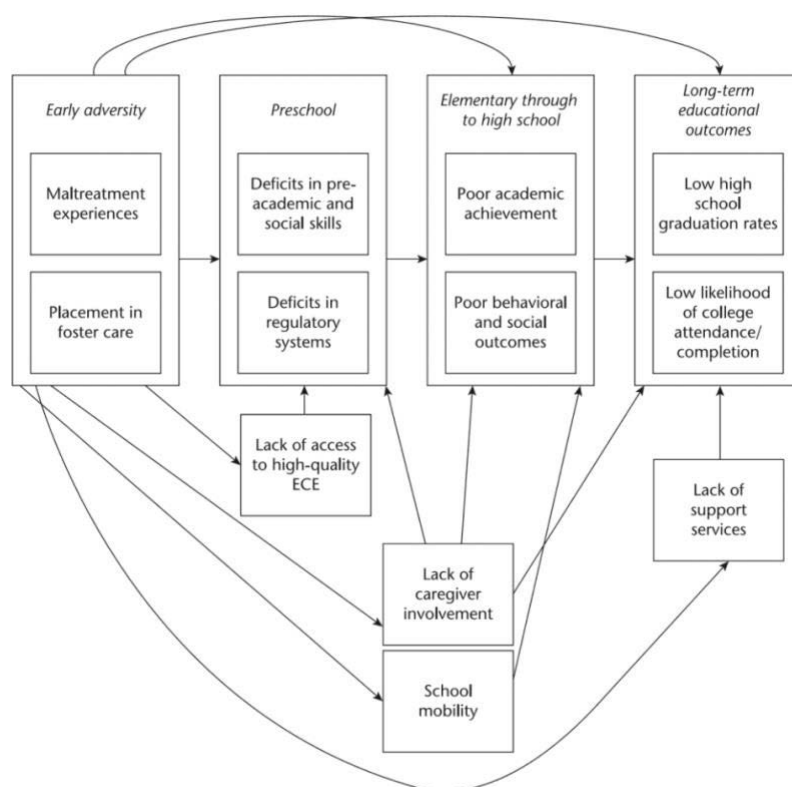
Note. Reprinted from *Handbook of foster youth* (p. 209), by E.T.C and N.T.S., 2018, Routledge. Copyright 2018 by Routledge.

Conceptual Framework

Edwards' (1980) policy implementation model provided a conceptual framework, adding context to aid in examining factors impacting successful policy implementation in child welfare and the downstream impact on foster youth educational outcomes. George Edwards' model regarding policy implementation was developed in 1980 and has since been adapted several times, but the core concepts of each adaptation remain the same: policy implementation success (Mubarok et al., 2020). Edwards' model suggests four key components of policy

implementation: communication, resources, dispositions, and bureaucratic structures (Edwards, 1980; Mubarok et al., 2020).

Theoretical Framework

The general systems theory (GST) developed by Ludwig Von Bertalanffy complements the policy implementation model by explaining the interactions and interconnectedness between various systems (Von Bertalanffy, 1950). Systems are characterized by components and the relationship among the components (Friedman & Allen, 2014). The theory suggests that researchers think about the whole and the interrelationship between factors instead of considering the factors individually (Shaked & Schechter, 2013). Furthermore, GST compliments the policy implementation theory by aiming first to understand a policy's desired solutions and use that knowledge to select and evaluate tools, processes, and other related factors necessary to address policy issues (Moldogaziev & Resh, 2016; Stewart & Ayres; 2001). Exploring GST aspects: interdependence and interrelation of parts, open and closed systems, hierarchy of systems, equifinality (a final state or outcome reached through varying pathways or conditions), and feedback loops will all aid in further understanding the complexity and interplay of system components in large systems such as CWAs.

Significance of the Study

Policy implementation research is essential for understanding what happens when federal legislation and state policy are delivered in various settings (Howlett, 2019). This study contributes to the current knowledge of the critical factors that impact policy implementation. Furthermore, the study outlines the significance of collaboration among systems and identifies best practice strategies for implementing ESSA for youth in the foster system. This is valuable because it can provide direction and recommendations for other CWAs and education agencies

looking to implement education policies collaboratively. The findings can help develop a plan of action to guide CWAs and education agencies in successfully implementing federal education policies.

Definition of Terms

The definitions below give meaning to key terms and acronyms that are used throughout the description of the research and literature review to aid the reader in understanding terminology and making connections.

Child welfare: a continuum of services designed to ensure that children are safe and that families have the necessary support to care for their children successfully (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2018, p. 1)

Child welfare agency: support or coordinate child welfare services at the state or locality level (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2018)

Education agency: state-based education agencies (SEA) or local education agencies (LEA) primarily responsible for the State supervision of public elementary schools and secondary schools (Individuals with Disabilities Act of 2004, 2017)

Effective implementation: implementation of and successful data reporting by the required deadline of indicators as identified and outlined by the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (as defined by the researcher for this study)

Federal law: passed by both houses of Congress and signed by the President (United States Senate, n.d., para 1).

Federal policy: a system of laws, regulations, and actions that the federal government takes on a specific issue or problem (Kilpatrick, 2000)

Foster care (out-of-home care) is a temporary service that states provide for children who cannot live with their families (Child Welfare Informational Gateway, n.d.).

Foster youth: children aged 0-20 in foster care (Annie E. Casey Foundation, n.d.)

Graduation rate: number of young people who are in foster care within 45 days following their 17th birthday who completed the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) and reported having received a high school diploma or general equivalency degree (GED) (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, n.d.)

Policy implementation: the state of policymaking between the establishment of a policy – such as the passage of a legislative act, the issuing of an executive order, the handing down of a judicial decision, or the promulgation of a regulatory rule – and the consequences of the policy for the people whom it affects (Edwards, 1980, p. 1)

Assumptions

Assumptions in qualitative research are out of the researcher's control but create a level of relevancy for the study. Often basic, but without them, the research problem would likely not exist (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010; Simon, 2011). Several assumptions are impacting this research study. The first assumption concerns the efficacy of other studies exploring the evidence-based interventions and tools referenced in this study. It is presumed that evidence-based interventions and tools impact the understanding of and implementation of policies and practices within child welfare. Secondly, the conclusions drawn by studies using the interventions and tools are accurate. Thirdly, it is assumed that the quantitative data from the DFPS Data Book, Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS), National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS), and The Child Welfare Outcomes Report are accurate.

Limitations

Limitations are also referred to as weaknesses in the study that are out of the researcher's control (Simon, 2011). With any research study, there are challenges to anticipate and plan for. One of the more significant challenges of this study included researcher bias. Managing researcher bias is an inevitable challenge intrinsic to most qualitative research (Chenail, 2011). Marshall and Rossman (2015) cautioned on the importance of researchers recognizing and openly documenting a personal bias. The researcher bias was called out and identified, specifically the in-depth awareness of the educational challenges foster youth face and the impact of CWAs practices related to policy implementation. The researcher's passion for the educational plight of foster youth, which is addressed via ESSA strategies, created an eagerness for the researcher to explore the research topic and determine factors related to implementation that were seemingly successful. Throughout the study, the researcher remained cognizant of bias to avoid allowing it to impact study conclusions. To reduce researcher bias, the researcher ensured no personal connections to the CWA office and/or personnel included in the research study. Furthermore, a reflective log was kept and constantly reviewed when interpreting interview responses to ensure no influence on the findings (Chenail, 2011).

Delimitations

Comparatively, delimitations are defined as characteristics that limit and define the study (Simon, 2011). One of the most significant delimitations of the research is the qualitative method. According to Creswell (2013), qualitative research methods are suitable when the study aims to explore the perceptions of a select group (or population) in trying to cultivate a comprehensive understanding of phenomena (Creswell, 2018). The researcher's interest in this study was to understand critical factors that impact federal policy implementation in CWAs and

the perceptions of collaboration among stakeholders working together for implementation. If the researcher had sought to understand different aspects, including the success of federal policy implementation, different research methodologies may have been more appropriate. The selection of the research participants, including Texas as the state of interest, was determined by evaluating available implementation indicators as outlined in ESSA. The inconsistency in the availability of all indicators required the researcher to be selective regarding the variables used to compare states for study participation. The decision to identify Texas as the state of interest was based solely on the availability of indicators that posed a delimitation to the study.

Conclusion

Federal policies have played a significant role in shaping the landscape of child welfare and the availability of services to foster youth across the United States. Implementing federal legislation, specifically ESSA, has varied among CWAs. The study aimed to understand critical factors impacting implementation by exploring implementation efforts from Texas DFPS and stakeholders within Region 10 of TEA. The research questions, guided by the Implementation Process Meaure (IPM) tool, provided valuable insights into federal legislation implementation factors and their associated implications. They ultimately contribute to the knowledge base in successfully implementing federal legislation and state policies for CWAs, informing best practice strategies.

Summary

In this initial chapter, the researcher first provided an overview of federal legislation impacting state child welfare systems, the history of child welfare, the educational plight of foster youth, and ESSA. The problem statement and purpose of the study were identified, and the problem's relevance and need for the study were justified. The research question was presented

together with the theoretical framework and conceptual models that guided research

methodology, assumptions, and limitations. Additionally, a table of key terms and definitions

was provided to assist the reader in understanding terms of importance frequently used

throughout the study.

Organization of the Study

The remaining chapters will be organized as follows: Chapter 2 will include a systematic

review of the available literature published on the implementation of legislation with a specific

focus on foster youth education trajectory; Chapter 3 will describe the qualitative design of the

study and the interview and focus group methods used to collect data; Chapter 4 will report the

results of the data analysis; and Chapter 5 will provide a summary of the study's findings (and

their limitations), recommendations for future research, and implications for practice.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

A literature review is a critical aspect of research as it provides an overview of key knowledge relative to the research topic and establishes the foundation for building on the current body of knowledge (Synder, 2019). Traditional literature reviews focus on restating information within studies, lacking thoroughness and a rigorous literature review methodology (Cooper et al., 2018; Synder, 2019; Wyborn et al., 2018). The literature review in this chapter followed a multi-step process aimed at synthesizing reviewed literature, providing evidence that can inform evolutions in practice and policy development (Synder, 2019). Researchers Cooper et al. (2018) and Synder (2019) identified steps for conducting systematic literature reviews. Synder (2019) identifies four key steps as designing, conducting, analyzing, and writing the review, while Cooper et al. (2018) outlined an eight-step process focused on designing and conducting the review. Figure 2 below provides an overview of the eight stages of developing and conducting the literature search. The steps identified by Cooper (2018) and Synder (2019) ensure that the most relevant literature is included in creating a systematic review that aided in exploring meaningful literature and built the theoretical foundation necessary to support answering the research questions. The literature search strategy section below provides a detailed account of the methods used at each stage of the search process to develop the systematic literature review guiding the study.

Figure 2

Stages of a Systematic Literature Search
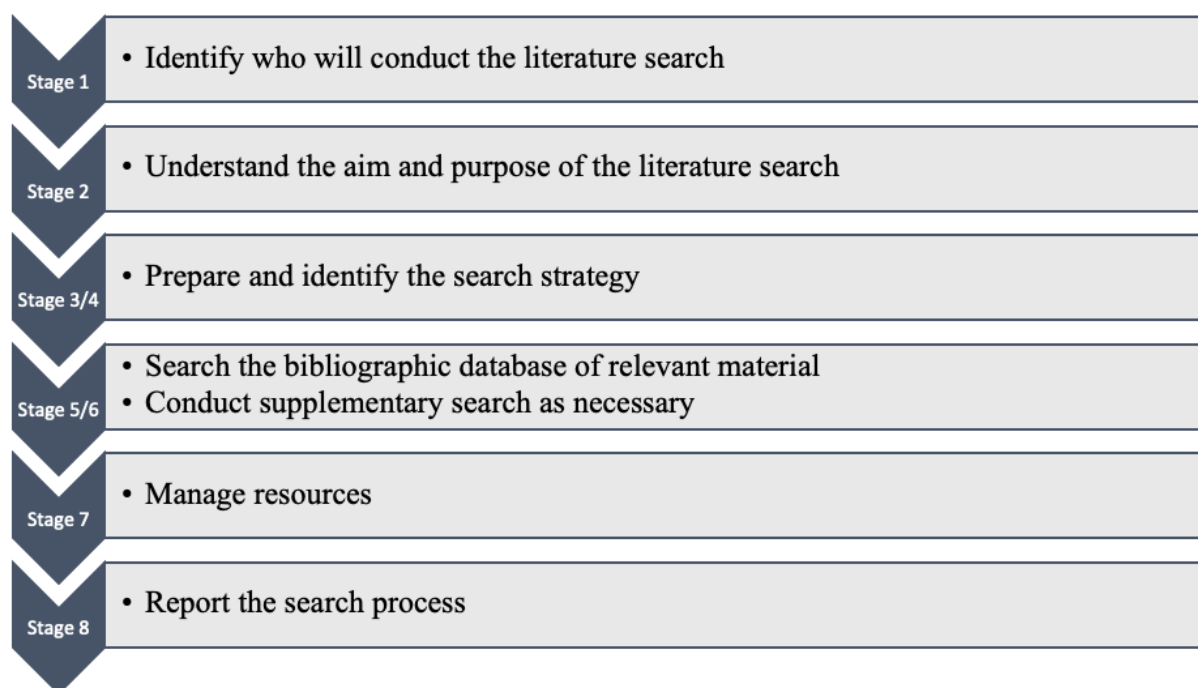
Note: The figure represents the key stages in developing and conducting a systematic literature search. Adapted from "Defining the process to literature searching in systematic reviews: a literature review of guidance and supporting studies," by C. Cooper, A. Booth, J. Varley-Campbell, N. Britten and R. Garside, 2018, BMC Medical Research Methodology, 18(85), p. 3. Copyright 2018 by BMC.

Literature Search Strategy

Since the inception of a formalized child welfare system in the United States, numerous federal legislative rulings have required changes to child welfare operations to remain compliant with legislative requirements. Efforts related to implementation have varied significantly depending on legislative requirements, child welfare agency (CWA) interpretation, fiscal support, and resource availability. Inconsistencies in federal legislation implementation, namely

the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), Fostering Connections to Success and

Increasing Adoptions Act (Fostering Connections Act or FCA) of 2008, and Every Student

Succeeds Act (ESSA), result in varied outcomes of child well-being in various sectors, including

and most notably education, according to The Annie E. Casey Foundation (n.d.).

Researchers Glisson (2007), Glisson and Green (2010), Akin et al. (2016), and Lambert

et al. (2016) contend that implementation efforts within CWAs often encounter difficulties as

many factors play into implementation success. This study will aim to answer the research

question: what are critical factors impacting the implementation of the Every Student Succeeds

Act (ESSA) between the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (TX DFPS) and

education professionals in school districts within Region 10 of Texas Education Agency (TEA)?

A thorough investigation into previous research studies, literature, and stakeholders' experiences

identified critical factors influencing the implementation within Texas DFPS.

An initial systematic search for literature dating within a five year period from (2017 –

2022) on databases in Franklin University's Library System, including but not limited to

EBSCO, APA PsycINFO, Education Full Text (EBSCO), OhioLINK, Proquest, Elsevier, ERIC,

and others provided a baseline for articles of a semi-related nature. Results from initial literature

review searches utilizing broad terms such as *child welfare, education legislation,* and *policy*

implementation (and more, as provided in Figure 3 below) yielded over 1,000 results from the

Franklin University Library Database System. The number of articles was minimized when

criteria were refined to include only full-text, peer-reviewed articles within the same 5-year

timespan (2017-2022) available within the library database. Utilizing such criteria decreased the

results to slightly over 600 articles but still proved to be a significant number to review.

Secondary search terms of more specificity, such as child welfare AND policy implementation

AND education policy implementation (see Figure 3 secondary search terms), yielded 38

articles. Figure 3 below lists the initial broad and more refined secondary search terms utilized.

Figure 3

Initial and Secondary Search Term
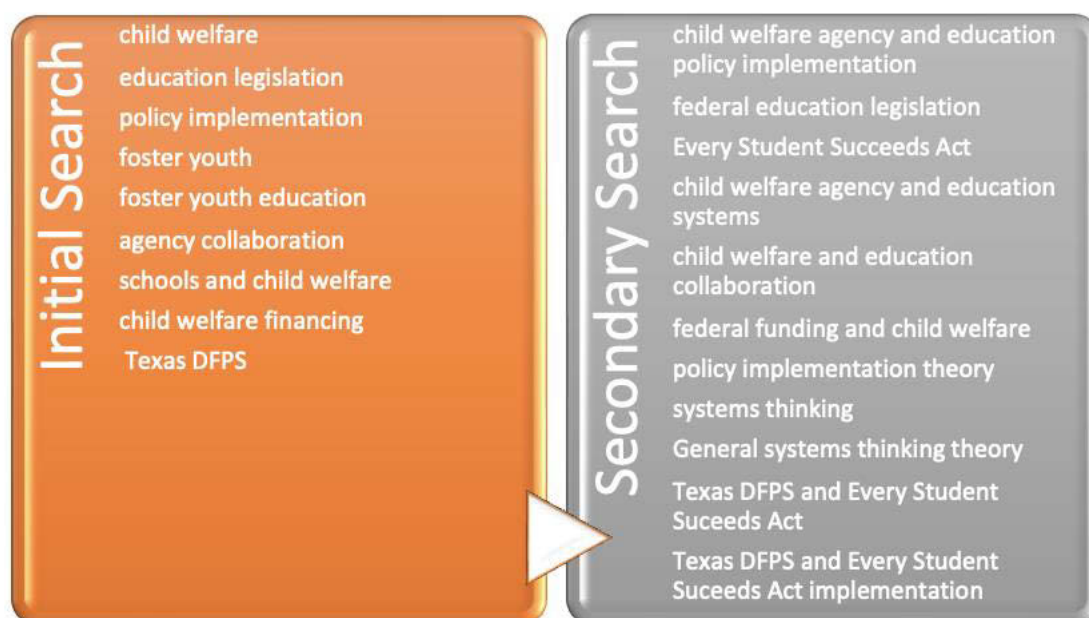
Note. The figure above outlines the key terms used for initial and secondary searches for study-

related literature.

The 38 resulting articles were scanned to ascertain relevance to the study through an

assessment of the study research question, environment and participants, methods,

methodological strengths and weaknesses, evidential findings, trends, and reliability.

Additionally, the references and bibliography sections of the resulting studies were scanned to

identify seminal and repeat researchers. The review aided in identifying literature by seminal

researchers Odden and Honig relative to education policy and implementation evolution and

George Edwards as foundational theorists pertaining to policy implementation model. Charles

Glisson and Andrea Zetlin were identified as subject-matter experts in child welfare practices

related to organizational culture for system implementation efforts and educational outcomes for foster youth. Researchers Glisson, Akin, Lambert, and Long conducted studies to understand factors that impact implementation within child welfare in some capacity.

Nevertheless, this literature review found a gap in recent literature, leaving room for a greater understanding of factors that impact efforts in child welfare specifically related to federal education policy implementation. The outcome of initial and secondary searches yielded many articles focused on ESSA legislation (overviews, critiques, and support of the act). In contrast, others provided recommendations and reviews of state plans submitted as a requirement of and to inform implementation efforts. Much of this literature was dated between 2015 and 2017, coordinating with the timeframe in which ESSA was signed into legislation and state implementation plans were required to be published. However, from 2018 to the present, there is minimal literature detailing the implementation of ESSA at the state level, the specific actions taken for implementation, and any updated reporting metrics. Studies from seminal researchers Odden (1991) and Honig (2006) provided a look back at implementation efforts related to initial education policy, ESEA 1965, and education policy changes over time; however, no literature was found examining child welfare, implementation factors, and federal education policy, ESSA.

To maximize the results of the literature review, it was critical to establish inclusion criteria (Synder, 2019). Study abstracts were reviewed for points of relevance that included a review of the research questions, participants, strengths and weaknesses, validity, and reliability. Considerations of whether the study answered the research question and yielded consistent results often spoke to the concepts of validity and reliability (Galvan & Galvan, 2017). To maximize the potential for applicable comparisons, the researcher included studies with similar study populations (child welfare agencies, educational systems, foster youth, etc..) and

methodologies (semi-structured, phenomenological, qualitative, and case studies). Best practice

suggests that researchers may include seminal information from critical researchers in the field

but also ensure that such seminal research is substantiated by current studies and findings

(Galvan & Galvan, 2017). Thus, as a selection criterion, this study included research completed

within a 5-year range (2017-2022). However, certain subjects did not have sufficient, applicable

research within the 5-year range, requiring the timespan to be expanded to ten years and beyond.

Managing research studies that met the inclusion process was important in developing the

literature review. Over 100+ studies were identified as potentially impactful to this research. The

organization of such studies was vital to aid the researcher in making connections for critical

points. Utilizing a combination of an online resource management tool and Microsoft Excel, a

table was created with descriptive information on key inclusion criteria to aid the researcher in

identifying pertinent information from various studies (Synder, 2019). Table 1 below provides a

snapshot of the reference management system used to manage references.

Table 1

Reference Management Tool

Author(s)	Year	Key Terms / Concept	Study population	Methodology	Findings	Recommendations
Glisson, Charles	2007	Organizational change Climate implementation	CWAs	Randomized controlled trial	Association between Organizational Social Context and implementation/change intentions, behaviors, and effectiveness	Develop more efficient and practical mechanisms to link organizational strategies for change with targeted organizational intentions and behaviors to support implementation or change efforts

Note. Table 1 provides an example of the Microsoft Excel-based reference management tool utilized by the researcher to manage literature.

Research in academic journals often provides a detailed account of risk, study limitations, and/or potential for bias (Synder, 2019). In assessing the quality of the included research studies, a review of the factors above was conducted to ascertain the level of risk, limitations, and bias identified by the author. The researcher used a minimal, average, or maximum scale to assess study quality and the ability of the study to support the literature review and answer the research question.

Once all key stages for literature identification were complete, the systematic literature review was developed (Cooper et al., 2018). The systematic literature review for this study began with an overview of child welfare, the educational plight of foster youth, and the federal education legislation that has been developed and enacted over time to positively influence academic success for foster youth. In addition, the literature review highlighted the general systems theory (GST) alongside policy implementation and systems thinking models, providing the theoretical and conceptual framework for understanding the connections between identified factors and implementation efforts of child welfare and education agencies. Furthermore, a historical review of policy implementation aided in establishing an understanding of the development of policy implementation frameworks and identified challenges related to implementation in child welfare and educational agencies. The systematic literature review concluded by providing data-driven justification for selecting TX DFPS as the state of interest for the research study.

History of Child Welfare

The Social Security Act of 1935, signed into legislation during the Roosevelt administration, marked the beginning of a formalized *child welfare* or *foster system*. The act acknowledged the need for and funded states' development of official agencies and establishment of programmatic services to support and protect vulnerable children (Fletcher, 2021; O'Neil-Murray & Gesiriech, 2004). As a result of The Social Security Act of 1935 and subsequent actions, the United States now has a formal government structure that provides services to vulnerable children and families. Housed under the Department of Health and Human Services and Administration for Children and Families, the singular mission of all agencies (public and private) and government branches that constitute child welfare is to "promote safety and well-being for children and their families" (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013, p. 1). However, numerous rulings have influenced legislation and ultimately created a shift in child welfare priorities that aim to support the agencies' mission. Significant legislation impacting child welfare over time include:

1. 1974: Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA)

2. 1980: Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act

3. 1993: Omnibus Reconciliation Act

4. 1997: Adoption and Safe Families Act

5. 2003: Keeping Children and Families Safe Act

6. 2018: Family First Prevention Services Act

Figure 4 below provides a timeline representation of U.S. legislation acknowledging and enhancing initiatives pertaining to the development of child welfare in the U.S.

Figure 4

Major Federal Legislation Influencing Child Welfare
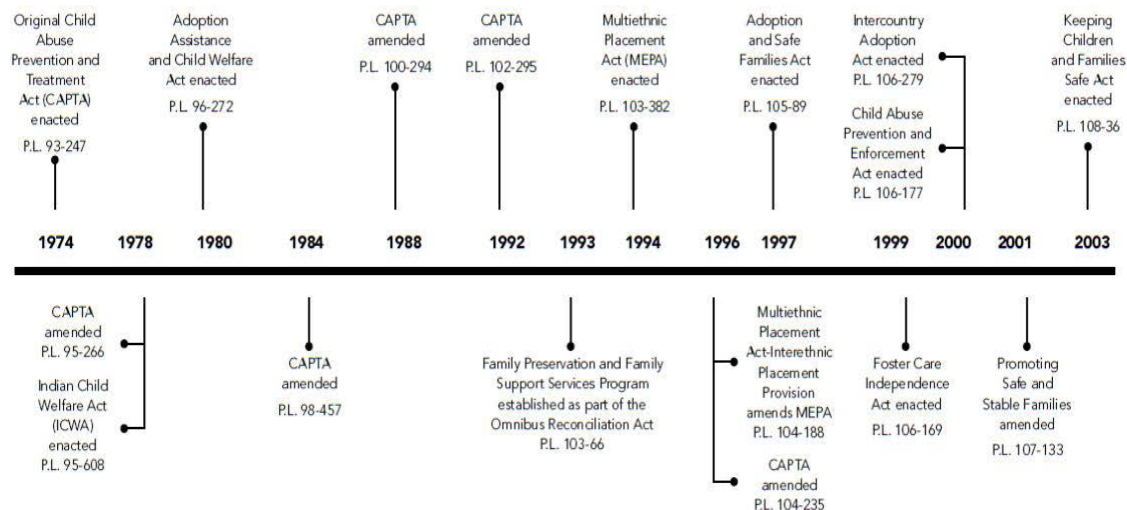
From "Major federal legislation concerned with child protection, child welfare, and adoption,"
by Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013,
https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/fedlegis.pdf Copyright 2013 by the U.S. Department of
Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau.

Legislative priorities shifted as the rates of welfare youth increased along with the
services needed to ensure well-being and safety (O'Neil-Murray & Gesiriech, 2004). Initial
legislative actions focused on the development of agencies and funding sources. Title IV-B is a
component of the Social Security Act of 1935 that established funding sources for federal and
state agencies via federal grants. Title IV-B remained a significant funding source for agencies,
with spending on Title IV-B funds reportedly over $528 million among states in 2018 (Rosinsky
et al., 2021). During the timespan from 1930 – 1970, the number of youths in foster care
increased drastically. Legislation noted this increase and included language shifting
responsibility to the state level for management and oversight of appropriate housing for youth

(Fletcher, 2021). However, housing alone did not address the growing delta between need and availability of resources to support youth in care. The later passing of the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980, Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997, and most recently the Family First Prevention Services Act of 2018 involved other agencies in the delivery of treatment and services for foster youth in efforts to decrease the number of new entrances to foster care each year and increase inter-agency collaboration (Fletcher, 2021; O'Neil-Murray & Gesiriech, 2004; Testa & Kelly, 2020).

Educational Plight of Foster Youth

Students in foster care suffer from educational instability and often find themselves behind the non-foster youth student population relative to educational attainment (Texas Education Agency et al., 2022). Systematic shifts in child welfare practices have often included attempts to address the academic challenges of youth in care (Gustavsson & MacEachron, 2018). In 2017, 442,733 youth were in foster care (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, n.d.). An educational review by Storey and Fletcher (2022) found one student in foster care for every 188 Pre-Kindergarten – 12th grade students. The study further found that each high school teacher is likely to encounter a foster youth daily in their educational setting, but less than 50% of youth were expected to graduate high school (Storey & Fletcher, 2022).

A myriad of factors was identified by researchers Berardi and Morton (2017), Pears et al. (2018), and Zetlin (2004) as impediments to the educational success of foster youth. During the last 20+ years, researchers such as Zetlin have identified educational barriers for foster youth. Factors such as trauma-informed educational approaches, availability of educational resources, and collaboration between the professionals and systems that support youth in care were identified as key concerns impacting foster youth educational success over the last 20 years and

remain challenges (Berardi and Morton, 2017; Fletcher, 2020; Pears et al., 2018; Zetlin, 2004; Zetlin et al., 2004).

A 2023 report of child well-being trends conducted by the Annie E. Casey Foundation provided data showing the rate of youth in foster care enrolled in school decreased from 94% to 54% from age 17 to 19. While the rate of foster youth not enrolled in school increased from 2% to 39% between the ages of 17 -19. Figure 5 below visually represents the shifts in foster youth high school enrollment between 17 – 19 years of age.

Figure 5

Enrollment of Current Foster Youth in Schools in the United States

United States
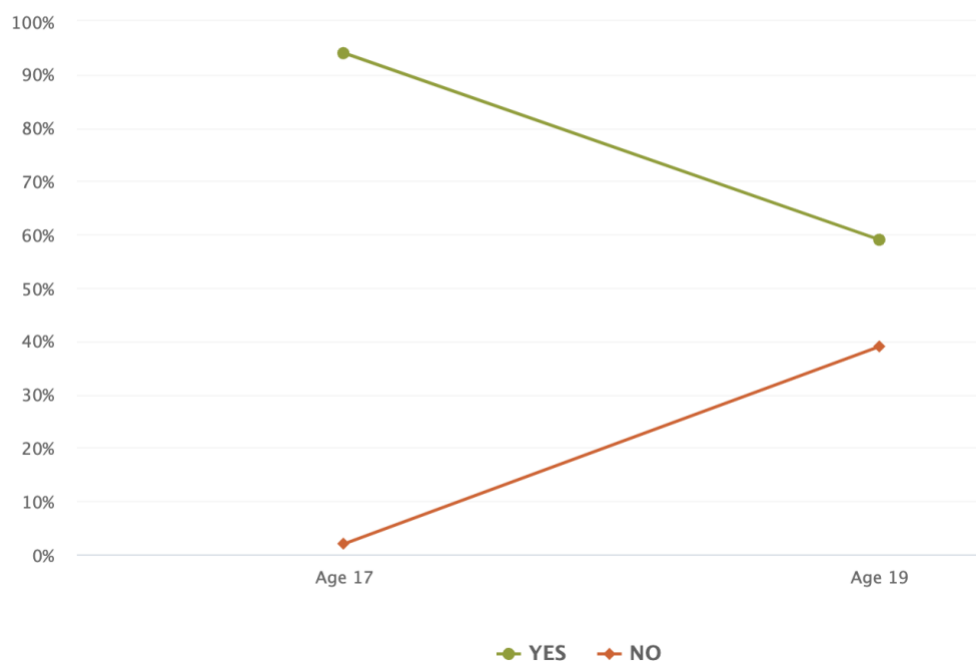
Note. The graph represents the percentage of foster youth enrolled in U.S. schools aged 17-21. From "Kids Count Data Book," by The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2018, https://datacenter.aecf.org/data/line/10204-youth-transitioning-out-of-foster-care-current-

enrollment-in-school?loc=1&loct=2#2/2-6/true/1698,1697,1690/asc/6259,6260,6261/19745

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Traditionally, it would be expected to see rates of high school enrollment decrease for youth ages 17-19. However, foster youth experience significant challenges, including higher rates of school changes, delayed re-enrollment, increased grade-level retention rates, and school suspensions, which impact foster youth on-time graduation (Burley, 2013; Long, 2023). According to Long (2023), a single school change decreased the odds of graduation by 39% among foster youth. Furthermore, a review completed by Burley (2013) found that 8% of foster youth in a 2011cohort graduated high school in 5 or more years. The graduation rate for foster youth in this cohort increased from 45% - 53% once the additional years were accounted for (Burley, 2013). Additionally, the age range for youth transitioning out of foster care ranges between 18-21, thus increasing the potential graduation age for this subset of youth (Armstrong-Heimsoth et al., 2021).

Unfortunately, school enrollment is but one of many data points that highlight the educational plight of foster youth. Despite the significant percentage of youth enrolled in high school, graduation percentages for foster youth are significantly less than that of their non-foster peers, with some states experiencing rates as low as 8% (Fletcher, 2022). Figure 6 shows the decline in foster youth graduation rates from 2019 to 2020 while also conveying the gap in the graduation rate between foster youth and their non-foster peers.

Figure 6

Percentage of Foster Youth Graduating from High School Compared to Non-Foster Youth

Academic Year 2018 - 2019

35.7%   64.3%

■ Foster Youth Graduates   ■ Foster Youth Non-Graduates

Academic Year 2019 - 2020

44.7%   55.3%

■ Foster Youth Graduates   ■ Foster Youth Non-Graduates

Academic Year 2019 - 2020
(Non-Foster Youth)

12.7%

87.3%

■ Non-Foster Youth Graduates   ■ Non-Foster Youth Not Graduating
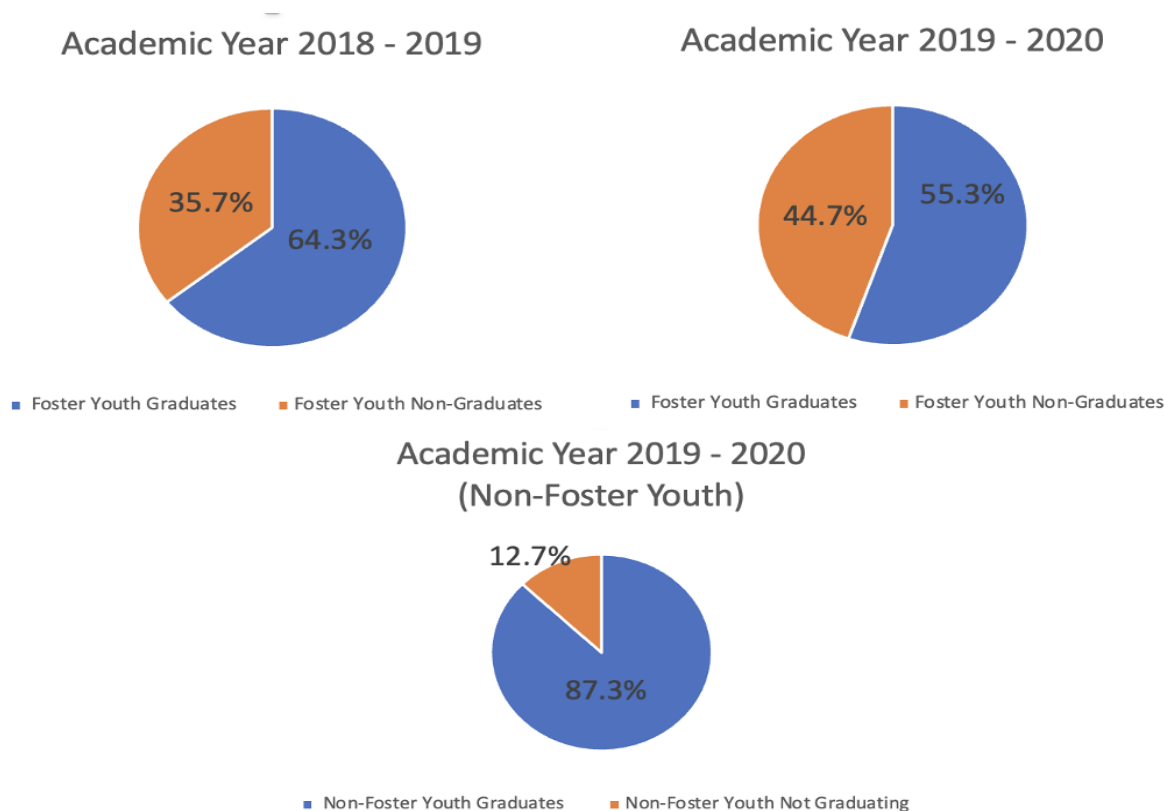
Note. A representation of foster and non-foster youth graduation rates from 2018-2020 academic years. Adapted from "19 interesting foster care education statistics" by What to Become, 2022, https://whattobecome.com/blog/foster-care-education-statistics/ by What to Become.(FosterS

Federal Education Legislation

Historical movements of the United States, such as the Civil Rights Movement during the 1960s, impacted the beginning developments of federal education legislation. The Civil Rights Movement exposed societal and educational inequalities (Kennedy, 2022). In response, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was passed in 1965. The ESEA provided

schools with fiscal support to improve the educational outcomes of low-income and ethnic students of color (Kennedy, 2022). Governance and administrative support for schools remained at the state and local levels, and state and local agencies ensured that federally instructed programs and services were offered within schools (Kennedy, 2022). Nevertheless, there is no evidence of changes in education policy or reform efforts as a result of ESEA to address the educational inequalities of specific student populations (Heise, 2017).

Discontent increased surrounding student performance and accountability, ultimately leading to the reauthorization of ESEA into the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, passed in 2001 (Heise, 2017; Kennedy, 2022). The focus of NCLB shifted significantly from ESEA through its intentions to address inadequacies in curriculum with an increased focus on accountability and quality (Heise, 2017; Hodge & Welch, 2016; Kennedy, 2022). Data collection was introduced to monitor student processes and highlight accountability (Heise, 2017; Hodge & Welch, 2016; Kennedy, 2022). NCLB ushered in a new perspective on education policy, bringing together new players, including education agencies at both the state and local levels, think tanks, and advocacy groups concerned with shaping education reform to ensure accountability for enhanced student outcomes (Kennedy, 2022). Although accountability was a focus of NCLB, NCLB legislation failed to provide depth to the notion of accountability by failing to require reporting of corrective measures for schools "in need of improvement" (McGuinn, 2016, p.2). Through this collective action, ESSA was developed as a reauthorization of ESEA and an improvement to NCLB.

After numerous congressional hearings lasting from 2011-2015 ESSA was signed into legislation under the administration of President Barack Obama on December 10th, 2015 (Sharp, 2016). Unlike previous education legislation, ESSA focused on decreasing federal oversight and

returning oversight and accountability to the state level (Bigley & Moore, 2019; Sharp, 2016). Specifically, ESSA called for amendments to Title 1 of ESEA, calling out requirements to address educational requirements for foster youth. Such requirements "increase educational stability, remove enrollment barriers, ensure high-quality educational opportunities, close achievement gaps, and promote college and career readiness for youth in foster care" (Bigley & Moore, 2019, p. 2), ultimately elevating the objective of Title 1 in ESEA to "provide all students with fair, equitable, high-quality education closing the achievement gap" (Every Student Succeeds Act, SEC. 1001. [20 U.S.C. 6301])

Criteria was established through ESSA to support efforts to close the achievement gap. The passing of ESSA expanded state-level accountability for foster youth indicators as a requirement for state-level report cards. ESSA legislation Section 1111(c)(2) recognizes foster youth as *economically disadvantaged students* (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015). While "economically disadvantaged" does not account alone for foster youth specifically, it does represent progress in calling out this subgroup of students to adequately and accurately measure achievement over time (Bigley & Moore, 2019; McGuinn, 2016).

Moreover, ESSA required collaboration among agencies that play a role in supporting the educational well-being of youth, including specifically that of foster youth. Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) calls out this requirement, stating:

State educational agency will…ensure collaboration with the State agency responsible for administering the State plans under parts B and E of title IV of the Social Security Act (42 U.S.C. 621 et seq. and 670 et seq.) to ensure the educational stability of children in foster care, including will designate an employee to serve as a point of contact for child

welfare agencies and to oversee implementation of the State agency responsibilities

(Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015).

As such, CWAs and educational entities, SEAs and LEAs, must designate a point of contact (POC) to work collaboratively to improve foster youth educational outcomes. Legislation finally affirmed and encouraged the integration of educational advocates, which researchers Weinberg et al. (2014) identified in previous years as a best practice to support the educational well-being of foster youth. President Barak Obama acknowledged the importance of ESSA in allowing state-level decision-making and collaboration in his words at the signing ceremony:

> This law focuses on a national goal of ensuring that all our students graduate…It builds on the reforms that have helped us to make so much progress already, holding everyone to high standards… empowering states and school districts to develop their own strategies for improvement, dedicating resources to our most vulnerable children. This bill makes long-overdue fixes to the last educational law, replacing the one-size-fits all approach to reform… It creates partnerships between the states, which will now have flexibility to tailor their improvement plans. (Kennedy, 2022, p. 27)

Following the passing of ESSA, states played a more active role in implementing the legislation. However, without direct guidance or suggestions on how to effectively implement ESSA, implementation efforts varied significantly among states as policy implementation is a complex process, often requiring the presence of key factors to be successful (Villagrana, 2020).

Policy Implementation

Policy implementation is a fundamentally multifaceted process shaped by the involvement of many contributors and contextual factors (Honig, 2006; Long, 2019; McDonnell & Elmore, 1987; Odden, 1991; Williams, 2019). The seminal research of Odden (1991) sets the

foundation for understanding education policy design evolutions. Honig (2006) builds on this work by identifying trends or waves in education policy implementation. The waves called out by Honig (2006) in the evolution of education policy identify the shifts in focus from what is implemented to the mechanisms of how and conclude with the connections between policy and people. Initial research in education policy implementation in the 1960s by Odden et al. primarily focused on examining *what* was implemented regarding the reliability of program models, amenability to top-down policies, and compliance with a focus on early education policies such as ESEA. Research around education policy implementation during the 1970s saw a shift in focus from *what* to a place of continuity and minimal change (Odden,1991). Eventually, longstanding policies such as ESEA began to experience reauthorizations, allowing for greater specificity in regulations for various populations, focusing on the role and importance of people and place as a consideration of policy implementation efforts (Honig, 2006). The 1980s established the foundation for focusing on the effectiveness of policy implementation and what was working and what was not (Honig, 2006; Odden,1991). Honig (2006) suggested that the last wave of education policy implementation focuses on new objectives and tools to increase the focus and connection between key factors, including stakeholders, location, and policy. The initial approaches to education policy implementation research with a focus on the policy itself as opposed to the practice of implementation received criticism from researchers such as Honig (2006), who contended that the education policy implementation question has shifted from "what is being implemented" to "what is implemented and works for whom, where, why, and how" (p. 2).

Policy Implementation Model

Despite shifts in the focus of education policy implementation, implementation fidelity has remained a constant (Honig, 2006). The longstanding development of policy implementation models aimed to guide implementation efforts to increase efficacy and fidelity in the process of implementation (Honig, 2006; McDonnell & Elmore, 1987; Odden, 1991). Early policy implementation models have been criticized by researchers in the policy studies field for many years, noting that early approaches centered around either front-end or back-end activities with either top-down or bottom-up approaches, which focused heavily on the policy itself and not the implementation process (Howlett, 2019). Policy implementation theorists often believed policy implementation to be equally, if not more important, than policy formation in relation to achieving policy goals; however, the focus and emphasis on success varied significantly among theorists (Mubarok et al., 2020). Seminal theorist George Edwards developed the foundational policy implementation model built on the belief that effective policy implementation was predicated on four determinants: communication, resources, dispositions, and bureaucratic structure (Edwards, 1980; Mubarok et al., 2020).

Communication. Edwards (1980) interprets communication as ensuring individuals involved in policy implementation understand what they should do. Concepts of transmission and clarity further define communication. Information about implementation specifics should be transmitted to the correct individuals concisely and accurately (Edwards, 1980; Mubarok et al., 2020). Any confusion, misunderstandings, or lack of clarity on behalf of those responsible for the implementation increases the likelihood of policymakers implementing the policy outside the intended manner (Edwards, 1980). Furthermore, inadequate communication leaves room for interpretation of delivery among implementors looking to drill down specific policies into

actionable steps with specific outcomes. Education policy is often developed at the federal level, with limited direction for states to effectively implement it to meet the intended goals (Honig, 2006; Odden, 1991). Akin et al. (2016) conducted a study in which the perspective of front-line CWA workers concluded the top complaint related to implementation was lack of adequate communication.

      Resources. A review of research studies aiming to identify challenges with policy implementation within child welfare highlights the availability and adequacy of resources as a significant constraint (Akin, 2016; Kaye, 2012; Lambert, 2016). Despite consistency regarding recognizing resources as a barrier, many definitions for resources remain. Edwards (1980) recognized the vast array by which resources could be defined and instead defined resources as the critical factors necessary for policy and implementation. Such factors were identified as staff, information, authority, and facilities. Staffing size must be adequate and equipped to handle the implementation as outlined per the policy (Edwards, 1980). Edwards (1980) contends that a lack of adequately trained and skilled personnel can significantly hinder implementation. Similarly, Kaye et al. (2012) support this viewpoint, stating that effective training is essential in building the capacity of CWAs to support implementation efforts. According to Edwards' model, information is the second-most essential resource since information transmission is two-fold, informing how policy implementation is carried out and providing data on compliance with established rules and regulations (1980).

      Another resource outlined in the policy implementation theory is that of authority. In its most simplified definition of authority, Edwards (1980) defined it as having the ability to implement the policy properly. A lack of formal authority can be misrepresented as effective, but authority on paper differs and has substantially less impact than authority to exercise and

implement action (Edwards, 1980; Kaye, 2012). Edwards specifically called out the idea of service orientation, which takes place when an individual or leader lacks the effective authority to ignite cooperation from implementors, thus approaching from a service (or asking) versus regulatory (or insisting) perspective (1980). Lambert et al. (2016) support this ideal, confirming that a strong relationship between executive leadership and practice-level workers naturally encourages support and participation in implementation.

Dispositions. Dispositions, attitudes, or beliefs of implementors significantly challenge effective policy implementation. Edwards (1980) advised that if an implementor has a cheerful disposition toward a policy, the likelihood of effective implementation increases. However, the converse is true if an implementor's attitude and perspective contradicts the policy. The process for implementation presents a more significant challenge (Edwards, 1980). In relation to education policy, it is often that those implementing the policy are not the policymakers, thus creating a sense of independence and increased discretion of the implementor to interpret the implementation of the policy (Edward 1980). Edwards (1980) advised that the level of autonomy and discretion created through this type of disposition is similar to that of an implementor who lacks clear and concise directives for implementation.

Bureaucratic Structure. The last of the determinants for consideration is bureaucratic structure. Edwards (1980) argued that policy implementors may know what to implement and possess the appropriate resources and desire but can still be limited by the organization's structure for effectively implementing the policy (Mubarok et al., 2020). Edwards described this concept as a bureaucratic structure with key characteristics of standard operating procedures (SOPs) and fragmentation (Edwards, 1980; Mubarok et al., 2020). Standard operating procedures (SOPs) are the routines within an organization that allow leaders to make daily decisions

(Edwards, 1980). SOPs aid in saving time and establishing a sense of uniformity for multi-faceted, complex organizations that often lack sufficient resources to implement policy effectively and efficiently (Edwards, 1980). Glisson (2007) conducted a study within CWAs to understand the impact of organization constructs on implementation efforts. Study results revealed that consistency in agency processes helped to overcome the effects of limited staff resources when implementing a new policy. Furthermore, Edwards (1980) discussed the impact of fragmentation or the dissemination of responsibility for a policy to differing units, requiring synchronization among all for effective implementation (Mubarok et al., 2020). Fragmented structures require increased communication and clearly defined authority to ensure implementation efforts are not stalled due to the involvement of numerous units (Edwards, 1980). Understanding the importance of SOPs and fragmentation as they relate to implementation is vital as these characteristics of bureaucratic structure can significantly impact implementation. When left unaddressed, these characteristics often restrict changes in policy, waste resources, breed unintended outcomes, impede coordination, and create confusion (Edwards, 1980; Mubarok et al., 2020).

Figure 7 below depicts the interrelationship of the variables above that directly and indirectly impact policy implementation.

Figure 7

Edwards Policy Implementation Model
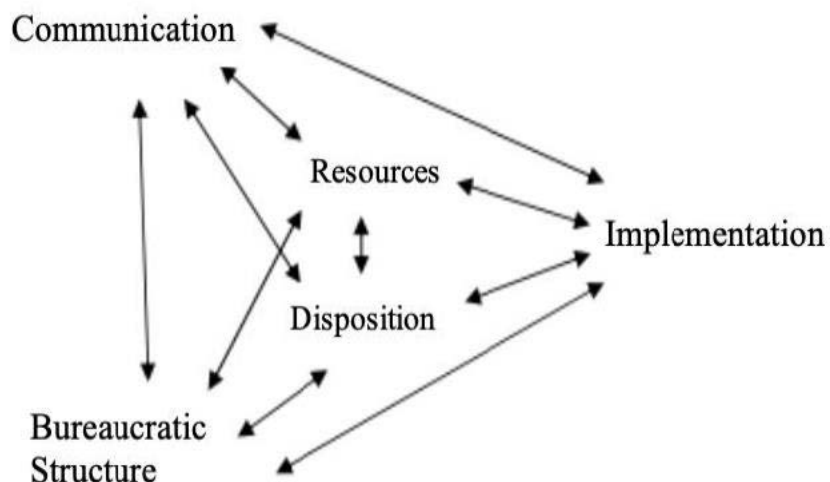
Note. The model represents the connections between the variables believed to impact policy implementation. Reprinted from *Implementing Public Policy* (p. 148), by G.C., 1980, Congressional Quarterly Press. Copyright 1980 by Congressional Quarterly Press.

  Understanding effective education policy implementation is inherently complex (Odden, 1991). Early theories aimed to ensure policies were written to address concerns of the time, eventually shifting focus to create a deeper understanding of implementation efforts and the impact on overall policy success (Odden,1991). For a policy to be effectively implemented, personnel must be clear on their role and have the appropriate resources and intent to implement it with fidelity (Mubarok et al., 2020). Despite a shift in efforts, significant challenges persist around developing a single theory to address policy implementation (Honig, 2006; Howlett, 2019; Odden, 1991). The general systems theory (GST) gives an overview of the interdependencies within systems that can influence policy implementation. GST is explored in conjunction with the policy implementation model to provide a theoretical framework exploring

and understanding interlinked processes and interactions within and among components of systems that influence policy implementation in CWAs (Stewart & Ayers, 2001).

General Systems Theory

Often, policy implementation failures occur due to a lack of awareness of all the "systems" at play (Howlett, 2019). Kowch (2016) describes educational ecosystems similarly to how Glisson (2007) describes child welfare systems as complex and dynamic, noting the importance of relationships, policies, staff, and resources functioning collaboratively to achieve organizational goals. Ludwig Von Bertalanffy developed GST with the objective to understand the interactions and interdependencies within and between systems under specific phenomena (1950). GST is formally defined as a theory that explains the "complex nature of organizations… and describes the group of elements that function together to fulfill some objective" (Mansourov & Campara, 2011, p. 82). Von Bertalanffy's theory posits several key aspects that play a significant role in the GST. Figure 8 below provides an overview of the interconnectedness of components in the systems theory.

Figure 8

Ludwig Von Bertalanffy's General Systems Theory
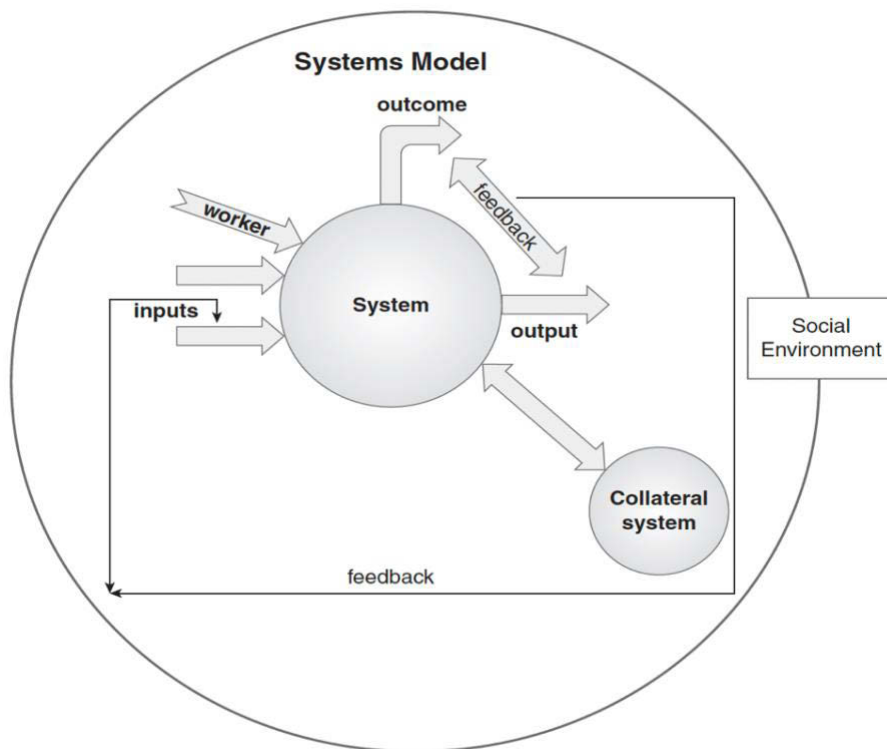
Note: The model represents the interconnectedness of variables within a system that influences the desired system outcome. Reprinted from "Systems theory: Framework for clinical practice" by B. Friedman and K.M. Allen, in J. Brandell, Essentials of clinical social work (p. 5), 2014, Sage Publishing.

Interdependence and Interrelation of Parts. The premise of GST is built on the notion that there is an interdependence and inter-relationship between the parts within a system, and a change in one element of a system can have an impact on various other parts, including the overall behavior of the system (Friedman & Allen, 2014; Stewart & Ayers, 2001; his). Von Bertalanffy (1950) defines a system as different elements interacting together in various ways depending on their relationship to one another. Child welfare organizations are often viewed as

complex systems with varying dimensions and domains at play that impact the outcomes of the system (Glisson, 2007; McCrae et al., 2014; Goering, 2018). A study completed by Hartnell et al. (2019) evaluated the association of an organization's culture with elements within the organization's system as a predictor of organizational success in meeting desired outcomes. In direct alignment with the GST, Hartnell et al. (2019) conclude that the predictor for organizational success is a result of the vastly interdependent parts of the system working together. Hartnell et al. (2019) identified the critical elements as "strategy, structure, leadership, and high-performance work practices," closely aligning with the key tenants of the policy implementation model, suggesting that bureaucratic structure and resources impact policy implementation efforts (p. 832). Furthermore, Glisson's (2007) study of child welfare agencies concluded that effective system practices were linked to organizational outcomes.

  Open versus Closed Systems. Differentiation between open and closed systems is a critical component of GST. A fundamental belief of GST is that every system must be able to maintain itself in a constant state of change among its components (Von Bertalanffy, 1950). Closed systems are relatively simple with a fairly constant composition while open systems can be complex and dynamic in their operational characteristics (Stewart & Ayers, 2001; Von Bertalanffy, 1950). Open systems are pliable and can self-regulate through feedback, adaptation and evolution in practices (Stewart & Ayers, 2001). Glisson (2007) describes CWAs as open systems noting that social service organizations are affected by numerous internal and external factors including collaboration with other systems. The cause-and-effect dynamics between social service systems and environmental forces (i.e. federal and state policy requirements and stakeholders) create a constant state of change within CWAs like that identified in open systems (Friedman & Allen, 2014; Glisson, 2007; Stewart & Ayers, 2001).

Hierarchy of Systems. Similar to Edwards' policy implementation model, GST recognizes the hierarchy of systems. Systems are often comprised of hierarchical levels, with each level being a system of its own and part of a large system makeup (Friedman & Allen, 2014; Von Bertalanffy, 1950). Glisson (2007) studied the organizational climate (or social context) of CWAs specifically noting the association and relationships between organizational and individual level climates and their impact on service outcomes. The study argued the importance of social context at all levels, noting that individuals develop a sense of culture among their peers that influences and can ultimately overshadow organizational constructs (Glisson, 2007; Glisson & Green, 2011). Understanding the hierarchical relationship in systems allows one to understand the significance of behavior and how specific behavior at one level can impact another level (Friedman & Allen, 2014).

Equifinality. Equifinality is a term utilized to describe the concept that the final stages of a phenomena are primarily impacted by initial conditions and processes within a system (Friedman & Allen, 2014; Von Bertalanffy, 1950). In an open system organization, a given phenomena can be reached via various means and pathways due to the adaptability and resilience of structures within the system (Stewart & Ayers, 2001; Von Bertalanffy, 1950). Stewart and Ayers (2001) explore the GST and its associated beliefs, specifically in relation to policy and practice. It is noted that organizations have the ability to reach similarly productive results, but the characteristics of the system implementing the policy often require different actions to yield said results. Moreover, a systematic review completed by Goering (2018) on child welfare agencies provides a contrary perspective related to the significance of resilience in meeting organizational outcomes. Study findings support the component of policy implementation suggesting that bureaucratic structure and leadership had a significant impact on overall

outcomes in CWAs and ways and methods used to achieve such outcomes (Edwards, 1980; Glisson, 2007; Goering, 2018).

Feedback Loops. In the GST, feedback is the regulated exchange of information between the system and the surrounding environment (Friedman & Allen, 2014). Friedman and Allen (2014) describe feedback as a "functional imperative" within the GST, noting that communication and feedback can either regulate or disrupt systems (p. 6). Feedback serves as a critical exchange of information that aids in determining if the system's outputs align with the system's goals (Friedman & Allen, 2014; Stewart & Ayers, 2001). Stewart and Ayers (2001) explored systems theory in relation to policy practices confirming the critical nature of feedback loops in the development and implementation of policy. Feedback loops aid in acknowledging relationships in systems allowing for a deeper understanding of the cause-and-effect connections (Friedman & Allen, 2014; Stewart & Ayers, 2001). Weeks (2020) found feedback to be a key element in eight key frameworks used in child welfare settings to support implementation efforts. Weeks' (2021) study proposed that CWAs move away from implementation frameworks and focus on key factors identified in all frameworks that influenced implementation efforts. Among the 10 key themes found in all frameworks, feedback was identified as a critical factor within and outside organizations, among individuals involved, and as a quality component of frameworks (Weeks, 2021).

GST is a multi-faceted theory whose concepts can be applied to systems in various industries. The theory itself helps to understand the interplay of systematic characteristics such as hierarchy, closed vs open systems, equifinality, homeostasis, and feedback in achieving a desired outcome. Systems thinking, a by-product of GST, concerns itself with understanding "processes, relationships, and interrelationships" (p.1) to comprehend the complexity of the GST (Nguyen et

al., 2023; Stewart & Ayers, 2001). Cabrera et al. (2008) identify patterns within the systems thinking framework, such as distinction, relationship, perspective, and system, which are in direct correlation to the concepts of GST and policy implementation model. Researchers Nguyen et al. (2023) conducted a study evaluating the use of systems thinking in developing and implementing public policy. Findings from Nguyen et al. (2023) support the patterns identified by Cabrera et al. (2008). Benefits from GST and systems thinking include understanding challenging problems and system complexity, obtaining varying perspectives and seeing the big picture, encouraging participation and collaboration, creating a shift in mindset to achieve shared understanding, and impacting policy and practice. The interplay of Edwards' policy implementation model, GST, and systems thinking helps to understand the interlinking of various system-related factors, but there remains a gap in knowledge related to systems thinking application, specifically concerning implementation challenges (Nguyen et al., 2023).

Policy Implementation and Child Welfare

CWAs have often alluded to challenges related to systems policy implementation. For example the benefits of policies are frequently not realized in CWAs due to ineffective implementation efforts (Hudson et al, 2019; Lambert et al., 2016). Other studies have set out to understand system change initiatives in child welfare and what plays a role in their success or failure (Decker et al., 2012; Glisson, 2007). A review of studies by Decker et al. (2012) found that implementation failure rates related to organizational change were as high as 93%. While this does not solely include CWAs, Glisson (2007) and Sanclimenti et al. (2017) suggest that implementation efforts within CWAs continue to need improvement. Sanclimenti et al. (2017) state that "implementing practice models in child welfare and making the necessary and

significant changes to established systems and infrastructure, organizational culture and climate, and frontline practice can be tremendously challenging work" (p. 280).

The congruence of factors as called out by Sanclimenti et al. (2017) as well as new considerations, such as agency collaboration, with the determinants for success from Edwards' theory of policy implementation and the constructs of systems thinking aid in interpreting interrelationships that establish the foundation for understanding critical factors impacting education policy implementation for CWAs.

Organizational Climate

CWAs have long struggled to meet the outcomes for which the system was designed, and legislation has been directed (Goering, 2018). Shifts in legislation have increased the emphasis on implementation efforts of CWAs to achieve systematic reforms as called out by specific legislative acts (Kaye et al., 2012). Increased focus by CWAs has been placed on implementation efforts to achieve desired outcomes; however, organizational challenges persist, impacting the CWA's ability to realize successful implementation. A study conducted by researchers Kaye et al. (2012) identifies key challenges CWAs face related to the implementation efforts of key policies. Kaye et al. (2012) specifically call out organizational factors, including: "facilitative administration (policies, procedures, and organizational structures)," leadership, and data support systems (p. 514). Kaye et al. (2018) place significant focus on a concept previously identified by Glisson (2007) as organizational context. Organizational Social Context (OSC), as defined by Glisson (2007), is a measure of the culture and climate in CWAs. The organizational climate or OSC is a "measure of the qualities of a work environment and how workers experience those environments" (Glisson & Green, 2011). Although not directly related to federal education policy implementation, Glisson, through several studies, has been able to draw the correlation

between OSC and implementation quality and outcome efforts (Glisson, 2007). In exploring why some CWAs appear to be more effective at reaching mandated goals, researcher Goering (2018) conducted a study to understand the impact of organizational climate on CWA outcomes. Through a systematic review of 115 articles assessing the relationship between organizational climate and outcomes in CWAs, Goering (2018) built on the seminal research of Glisson, identifying organizational climate as a predicting factor in implementation and outcomes success for CWAs. Efforts to achieve better outcomes were more successful as CWAs expressed nimbleness in their ability to adjust organizational climate to meet policy demands (Goering, 2018).

Findings from Green and Glisson (2011), Kaye et al. (2012), and Goering (2018) conclude that engagement and success in implementation efforts are largely impacted by organizational climate. A CWAs ability and willingness to adapt its organizational climate will lead to greater outcomes relative to implementation efforts (Goering, 2018; Green & Glisson, 2011; Kaye et al, 2012)

Agency Collaboration. Educational constituents and child welfare advocates have equally expressed concern regarding the academic necessities of youth in care that remain unmet by SEAs, LEAs, and CWAs alone (Stone et al., 2007). Policy has often been used to catalyze systematic reform, particularly in education (Bush-Mecenas et al., 2023; Spillane et al., 2002). Collaboration among agencies has been a focus of researchers for many years as collaboration, particularly in policy design, incorporates the perspectives of stakeholders, increasing the likelihood of successful implementation (Villagrana, 2020). ESSA legislation outlines the requirement of CWA and education agencies, at both the state and local level, to work collaboratively to:

- make "best interest determination" about school placement for youth in foster care;

- assign a foster care "point of contact" within each district and CWA;

- develop transportation procedures for foster youth to attend school of origin (specifically for schools receiving Title 1 funding).

(Bigley & Moore, 2019; Bush-Mecenas et al, 2023; Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015)

Despite understanding the critical nature of effective agency collaboration among CWAs and educational systems in policy implementation, the unprecedented reality of challenges related to agency collaboration remains (Bigley & Moore, 2019; Bush-Mecenas et al., 2023). A study by Stone et al. (2007) explored the perspectives of child welfare and education stakeholders in nine counties in Northern California, identifying commonalities and inconsistencies in perspectives related to implementing educational services for youth. The study consisted of interviews with 14 individuals in the child welfare and education sectors. Questions were asked to assess current collaborative processes, barriers, and suggestions for change related to specific educational services for youth in care. Findings from this study identified communication and collaboration between the systems as key challenges, explicitly noting that "collaboration can be challenging when the goals and focus of each institution are different" (Stone et al., 2007, p. 62). A participant in the study specifically noted that "child welfare is devoted to safety and education is not part of the picture" (Stone et al., 2007, p. 63). Participants from both systems agreed that lack of coordination, collaboration, and shared goals create barriers to implementation efforts (Stone et al., 2007; Villagrana, 2020).

A more recent study conducted by Villagrana (2020) uses the constructs of collaborative advantage to develop a framework for successful collaboration among CWAs and education agencies as ESSA requires. In developing the framework, Villagrana first identifies current

challenges with cross-agency collaboration similar to those identified 13 years previous by Stone et al. Villagrana (2020) adds to the list of the importance of understanding or lack thereof, specifically noting that a lack of understanding about an individual's role regarding policy will impede the ability to collaborate as designed to achieve the goal effectively. Moreover, Villagrana (2020) notes the impact surrounding the lack of regulatory guidance and direction for facilitating collaboration among the systems. The lack of direction on creating synergy among differing priorities further perpetuates the potential for communication challenges and ineffective implementation of the legislation (Bush-Mecenas et al., 2023; Stone et al., 2007; Villagrana, 2020).

Studies show that collaboration is both an ambition and a challenge for educational systems and CWAs alike (Bush-Mecenas et al., 2023). Enabling factors such as communication, lack of understanding, and regulatory guidance have plagued cross-agency collaboration before ESSA (Bush-Mecenas et al., 2023; Stone et al., 2007; Villagrana, 2020). With the implementation of ESSA, it is believed that cross-system collaboration will enhance the educational stability and, ultimately, the educational trajectory of foster youth.

Financial Implications. Notwithstanding the mission to protect and provide for over 400,000 vulnerable youth each year, the child welfare programs at the state and local levels have long been influenced by finances, politics, and society (Fletcher, 2021). Child welfare initiatives have had a noteworthy impact on legislative budgets since the Social Security Act was signed into legislation in 1935 (Fletcher, 2021). The complexities of child welfare financing have shifted due to the signing of various legislative bills explicitly related to child welfare initiatives (Fletcher, 2021). Primary federal funding for CWAs stems from Title IV of the Social Security Act of 1935, specifically parts B and E of Title IV, of which part B supports measures to prevent

maltreatment while part E funds direct initiatives to support youth in care (Child Trends, 2023; Fletcher, 2021). The amount of Title IV federal funds received by each state varies annually, but 23% of funds spent annually on child welfare initiatives at the state level are derived from Title IV funds (Child Trends, 2023).

Neither component of Title IV funding is intended to support endeavors to meet the educational needs of foster youth. ESEA legislation began as the nation's primary funding source for K-12 education endeavors (Skinner & Cooper, 2019). The reauthorization of ESEA into ESSA has shifted educational funding under the new legislation and rules. Identified as the greatest program in ESSA legislation, Title I-Part A was explicitly designed to provide funding for "supplementary educational and related services to low-achieving and other students attending elementary and secondary schools with relatively high concentrations of students from low-income families" (Skinner & Cooper, 2019, p. 1). Title I-Part A funds provided over $15.8 billion of federal funding in fiscal year 2018 to support educational endeavors for low-achieving youth (Skinner & Cooper, 2019). Title I – Part A provisions require grant funds to be distributed to LEAs through SEAs based on a set of formulas used to determine an appropriate allocation. Not until the passing of ESSA has legislation allowed for the transferability of funds among federal programs under varying titles actions within ESSA (Black, 2017). ESSA consolidated numerous smaller grant opportunities into what is currently known as a single "block grant." The "block grant" allows for fewer restrictions and the use of funds for "school-wide programs" instead of those targeting specific student populations (Black, 2017).

Although there is not a single source of funds from which child welfare and educational agencies can draw to support the collaborative efforts as ESSA requires, ESSA does suggest the notion of "shared fiscal responsibility" (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015). However, without

direct guidance outlining the fiscal input of each organization for shared purposes, there will continue to be significant underfunding to support the collaborative efforts of CWAs, SEAs, and LEAs (Bush-Mecenas et al., 2023; Villagrana, 2020).

TEA, TX DFPS, and ESSA Implementation

ESSA was signed into legislation on December 10th, 2015; however, states were only required to develop and submit state-level plans for implementation in April 2017, with some extensions until September 2017 (Texas Education Agency, 2017). There were no universal rules dictating the requirements of state plans; thus, the approach to achieve the objective of ESSA, "excellent and equitable outcomes for all," differs by state (Weiss & McGuinn, 2016, p. 29). This research study will focus on Texas DFPS and SEA (TEA) as the model for understanding factors that impact ESSA implementation.

As of the first full academic year of ESSA plan implementation, 2017-2018, over 5.3 million students were enrolled in Texas schools, and over 16,000 were reported as youth in foster care (Texas Education Agency, 2018). For many years, Texas has ranked 2nd in the highest number of foster care placements behind California (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, n.d.). Despite caring for many youth in out-of-home placements, TEA maintained its commitment to ESSA requirements. The figure below shows the number of foster youth enrolled in Texas schools from 2013 -2018.

Figure 9

Foster Youth Enrolled in Texas Schools from the 2007 through 2018 Academic Years

Enrollment for Instructional Programs and Special Populations, Texas Public Schools, 2007-08 Through 2017-18

Year	At-risk		Bilingual/ESL[a]		Career and technical[b]		ELL[c]		Foster care	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
2007-08	2,256,606	48.3	721,750	15.5	417,225	32.2	775,432	16.6	n/a[d]	n/a
2008-09	2,292,574	48.3	757,824	16.0	429,709	33.0	800,554	16.9	n/a	n/a
2009-10	2,283,490	47.1	779,771	16.1	444,402	33.5	817,074	16.9	n/a	n/a
2010-11	2,281,864	46.3	797,683	16.2	469,086	34.8	831,812	16.9	n/a	n/a
2011-12	2,267,995	45.4	809,854	16.2	483,122	35.5	838,418	16.8	n/a	n/a
2012-13	2,264,815	44.6	840,724	16.6	488,253	35.2	864,682	17.0	n/a	n/a
2013-14	2,566,623	49.8	879,226	17.1	498,132	35.3	900,476	17.5	11,494	0.2
2014-15	2,673,039	51.1	931,376	17.8	536,551	37.0	949,074	18.1	13,695	0.3
2015-16	2,649,069	50.0	969,135	18.3	629,689	42.2	980,487	18.5	14,319	0.3
2016-17	2,689,018	50.2	1,005,765	18.8	705,628	46.3	1,010,756	18.9	14,685	0.3
2017-18	2,739,303	50.7	1,015,972	18.8	778,385	50.3	1,015,372	18.8	16,233	0.3
10-year change	482,697	21.4	294,222	40.8	361,160	86.6	239,940	30.9	n/a	n/a

Note. The chart provides the number of foster youth enrolled in Texas public schools from 2007-2008 to 2017-2018 academic years. From "Enrollment in Texas public schools, 2017-18" by Texas Education Agency, 2018, https://tea.texas.gov/reports-and-data/school-performance/accountability-research/enrollment-trends?LangType=1033

In 2017, ESSA required states to capture disaggregated graduation rates to include foster youth as part of the economically disadvantaged student population (Texas Education Agency, 2018). However, as noted in the submitted state plan for ESSA implementation, TEA had captured this data for years prior, unlike states such as Georgia, which continued to fail to report graduation data for foster youth as of the 2022-2023 academic year (Governor's Office of Student Achievement, n.d.). A report by Portz and Beauchamp (2022) reviewed plans submitted by 51 states in response to ESSA to examine differing approaches to implementation

requirements and educational accountability. States were grouped into clusters based on indicators, including academic achievement, student growth, graduation rates, and school quality/student success (Portz & Beauchamp, 2022). Findings from the study suggest that the design and implementation of state plans were primarily impacted by the congruence of political, economic, motivational, and institutional factors (Portz & Beauchamp, 2022). Part of Cluster 1, Texas emerged as the state with the largest population of enrolled students and foster youth, one of the highest goals for graduation rate improvement, all while facing significant economic challenges due to higher student poverty rates (Portz & Beauchamp, 2022). Furthermore, Portz and Beauchamp (2022) report that states in Cluster 1 are expected to have reduced resources to support educational endeavors despite having a significantly higher rate of economically disadvantaged students. Published documents such as *A Middle Way for States in the ESSA Era: Lessons from Texas* and *Foster Care and Student Success: Texas Systems Working Together* detail the efforts of TEA, TX DFPS, and other stakeholders in collaborating to implement ESSA requirements.

Summary

The passing of ESSA legislation proposed significant shifts to the educational landscape, attempting to create equal opportunities for all students (Sharp, 2016). Title 1- Part A of ESSA recognized measures to support low-achieving, economically disadvantaged students through enhanced state accountability, annual student subgroup reporting, and stakeholder collaboration (McGuinn, 2016; Sharp, 2016). Additionally, ESSA legislation required SEAs, LEAs, and CWAs to work collaboratively to enhance educational stability for foster youth (Bigley & Moore, 2019; Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015).

Limiting federal oversight, ESSA placed a higher level of accountability on states to implement and oversee the actions and outcomes of ESSA (Bigley & Moore, 2019; Sharp, 2106). However, policy implementation presented a challenge as CWAs and educational systems were confronted with working collaboratively to achieve a single mission despite differing organizational priorities (Bush-Mecenas et al., 2023; Gustavsson & MacEachron, 2018). Researchers Glisson (2007), Kaye et al. (2012), and Goering (2018) identify the need to evaluate organizational climate before implementation to promote positive outcomes. Stone et al. (2007) and Villagrana (2020) note that organizations must be aligned and understand their role relative to implementation. Finally, the financial inhibitors impacting the implementation of ESSA in CWAs are explored. Despite identified challenges related to ESSA policy implementation Texas stakeholders from both TEA and DFPS collaborated to develop innovative methods to meet the requirements of ESSA (Opalka et al., 2019). A literature review from 2017 to the present focuses heavily on the implementation efforts of SEAs diminishing any required changes to CWAs policies, processes, and infrastructure necessary to implement ESSA.

Chapter 3 provides a detailed overview of this study's qualitative research design methodology. The participant selection criteria is comprehensively described along with the data collection methods. Chapter 3 also detailed researcher bias, validity, and reliability as they relate to the study's credibility. The chapter concludes by providing a thorough overview of the data analysis methods utilized to understand the study findings.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Research Design and Rationale

Qualitative research is often interpreted as a "meaning-making process" exploring the meaning and importance of a phenomena through the lens of the individuals within the social context (Merriam, 2022; Patton, 2015). Qualitative research is characterized by Patton (2015) as 1) the significance of the researcher to be emersed in and inseparable from the process of inquiry, 2) the privileging of the perspective of research participants, 3) the integration and transparency of theoretical frameworks, and 4) the inductive nature. Qualitative research aims to understand a phenomena by first exploring and understanding various facets (cultural, community, societal, and historical) that impact and influence the nature of the phenomena. Defined as and often intertwined with interpretivism, social constructivism aims to understand and provide meaning to experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The social constructivism worldview is utilized to explore critical factors influencing the implementation of ESSA by understanding experiences of stakeholders.

This study employed the constructs and methods of a qualitative study informed by case study methods in efforts to fully understand the challenges and tactics surrounding federal education policy implementation, with a focus on ESSA, from an organizational and stakeholder perspective. Case study methodology enables the researcher to develop an in-depth understanding of a particular policy, process, and interpretation within the parameters of a particular context. The case study methodology is well suited for aiding the researcher in understanding change processes or phenomena within a certain time and context. Ultimately allowing the researcher to answer questions of "why" and "how" (Yin, 2012 & Yin, 2014). The availability of secondary data allowed for the establishment of a database to support an in-depth

study of the interpretation, implementation, and response to ESSA within the TX DFPS agency. While case study methods were utilized to aid the researcher in developing an in-depth understanding this study was not conducted solely utilizing case study methods.

The purpose of the study was to understand critical factors that influence the implementation of federal education legislation, ESSA, at the state level which impacts foster youth educational success. The primary data source for the study were interviews from individuals within TX DFPS and a focus group of individuals in Region 10 TEA.

This study consisted of an in-depth analysis of ESSA implementation strategies of TX DFPS, a CWA, through secondary data review and primary data collection via semi-structured interviews exploring critical factors and stakeholder experiences relative to ESSA implementation. The semi-structured nature of the study allowed the researcher the flexibility to follow the flow of the interview allowing for an in-depth understanding and application of disclosed implementation information (Creswell, 2013). The information gathered in the interviews was supplemented by publicly available state documents, demographics, and programmatic materials that aided the researcher in broadening the depth and breadth of knowledge pertaining to ESSA helping to answer the research question and better understand federal education policy implementation.

For over five years, Texas has been among the top states with the largest number of youth in foster care (Casey Family Programs, n.d.). From 2013 – 2019 the state of Texas was accountable for nearly 8% of all foster youth encountering child welfare services in the United States (Casey Family Programs, n.d.). Despite the significant number of youth for which Texas DFPS is responsible the number of foster youth enrollments and reported educational outcomes (i.e., graduation rates) surpass that of many other states (Portz & Beauchamp, 2022; Texas

Education Agency, 2018). In direct alignment to ESSA requirements, the limiting of school changes per foster care placement, availability and accessibility of educational data particularly pertaining to identification of foster youth as a sub-group in state level education data specifically graduation rates, and federal education funding versus spending per pupil were examples of implemented strategies that are yet to be practices of other states, such as Georgia, despite the legislative requirements effective 2017 with the adoption of ESSA. As such, TX DFPS was selected as the primary focus for this research to examine the organizational factors that contribute to the successful implementation of ESSA and answer the studies' research questions:

RQ1: What are critical factors impacting the implementation of Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) between Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (TX DFPS) and education professionals in school districts within Region 10 of Texas Education Agency (TEA)?

RQ2: What are the experiences of stakeholders (i.e., caseworkers, supervisors, program managers, and administrators) within Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (TX DFPS) concerning collaboration in relation to implementation of Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)?

RQ3: What are the experiences of stakeholders (i.e., teachers, counselors, and principles) within Region 10 Texas Education Agency (TEA) concerning collaboration in relation to implementation of Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)?

Researcher Positionality and Subjectivity

The role of the researcher within this study was to collect and analyze data, discuss findings, and develop conclusions that answer and provide response to the research questions. As

noted by Denzin and Lincoln (2012), qualitative researcher often involves the researcher as an instrument for the study. The researcher was the primary party responsible for the collection of data from publicly accessible secondary sources (documents, briefings, online portals, etc.) as well as semi-structured interviews with TX DFPS employees and representatives from Region 10 TEA. It was researcher responsibility to make participants comfortable with candidly sharing information. In efforts to create the rapport necessary to foster candid conversations, participants were assured of the strict confidential nature of all information shared. Prior to beginning any interviews, a brief dialogue with participants was had to ensure a complete understanding of the study and address any unanswered questions pertaining to the study.

Roulston and Shelton (2015) advise that a key imperative for researchers is to understand, be aware of, and acknowledge values and predispositions as inseparable to the research. Bias in any form poses a threat to research validity if not subjectively recognized and called out (Chenail, 2011; Roulston & Shelton, 2015). The importance of openly communicating research bias so as to make evident any distinctions between data and personal perspective is evidently stressed in the work of Chenail (2011) and reiterated in the more recent research of Roulston & Shelton (2015). As an integral instrument in the research, the researcher is keenly aware of bias based on professional and personal engagement with the child welfare system and foster youth over a 20-year timespan. A significant passion and connection to advocacy for foster youth could have led to issues such as unconscious bias and invalid data evaluation and interpretation.

Creswell (2013) emphasizes and warns researchers of the significance of planning how bias will be controlled. Therefore, it was vital when analyzing qualitative data that processes were in place to limit researcher interpretations or conclusions of data. Efforts taken to minimize the possibility of researcher bias included identifying preconceptions of implementation

strategies prior to beginning data collection and journaling personal reflections that emerged during data collection. As suggested by Kiger and Varpi (2020), when analyzing the data any assumptions that shaped the analysis were identified and documented. The reflective journaling provided an opportunity for critical self-reflection about bias and increased transparency to the research. Constant comparison of personal reflections and data gathered from participants acted as a mechanism to consistently verify no personal bias was inserted into participant response analysis.

Sampling and Description of Research Participants

The selection of the state of TX DFPS as the state for which the research is centered was based on a combination of analysis of states with comparability relative to size, number of foster placements, accessibility of implementation plans and information (excluding required state implementation plan submissions), availability of pre and post ESSA data indicators including graduation trends over a 5-year period. Convenience sampling, or the selection of participants based on ease of access, was also a major factor in the selection of TX DFPS (Creswell, 2018). The availability of data at the national and state level via databases such as DFPS Data Book, Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS), National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS), The Child Welfare Outcomes Report, and National Center for Education Statistics among others, provided extant data utilized to further analyze implementation efforts through potential change in key indicators (i.e., reporting data and per pupil spending) impacting foster youth educational success and as identified in ESSA legislation. Table 2 below details the databases utilized and the respective information gathered from each source to aid in selecting the state of focus for this study.

Table 2

Child Welfare and Education Databases for Analysis

Database	Information	ESSA Indicator
Department of Family Protective Services (DFPS) Databook	State specific data related to various child welfare indicators (i.e., No. placements)	- Home school changes
Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS)	National data on foster care counts (entrance and exit) in fiscal year including demographics, length of time in care, and outcomes	
National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS): Child Welfare Outcomes Report	National data collection system that gathers information for each state relative to child welfare metrics and outcomes	
National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)	Repository for education data in the US with national and state-level data	- Graduation rates - Per pupil spending - Academic achievement

Once Texas was identified as the state to review for best practices the participant selection criteria was developed. This research study was derived to further explore the impact of factors (i.e., organizational climate, collaboration, and finances) as identified in the literature review and their influence on ESSA implementation in CWAs.

Creswell and Creswell (2018) contend that the premise behind qualitative research is to purposefully select participants that will help the researcher understand the problem and research question. As such, there was specific criteria for the selection of study participants.

Individuals were selected to partake in the study through purposive sampling identifying selected individuals that met specified selection criteria. In efforts to explore and understand such factors, it was necessary to interview individuals of various positions within TX DFPS that influenced, impacted, or engaged in the implementation of ESSA. Furthermore, participants from Texas schools in Region 10 of TEA were selected to participate in a focus-group to better understand implementation strategies from the educational perspective. The incorporation of multiple methods or data sources for research to aid in developing a full understanding of desired phenomena is known as triangulation (Carter et al, 2014; Patton, 1999). Patton (1999) identifies four types of triangulation used in studies: investigator, method, data source and theory. This study used the data source triangulation methods by collecting data through semi-structured interviews as well as focus group. The use of data source triangulation allows for different perspectives on resources and issues related to the phenomena (Carter et al, 2014). Furthermore, research finds that in comparing the data from multiple sources the researcher explores the phenomena with more depth, develops a greater understanding of the context, and trustworthiness of the findings is increased (Carter et al, 2014). These findings were supported in a report compiled by Carter et al (2014) in which various studies were reviewed in which data source triangulation methods were evaluated. Interviews and focus groups were conducted and studies found that the use of these combined methods provided the researcher a broader understanding of the phenomena (Carter et al, 2014).

Study participants must have either worked in the child welfare system (i.e., state or county-level) or school system (independent school district, private, or charter system) in the state of Texas within the past six months. Study participants must have had some level of background knowledge pertaining to federal education legislation (i.e., ESSA) and associated

requirements for implementation for their respective organization. Eligibility for the study was contingent on the criteria below:

Child Welfare Agency Representatives

- Must have worked within the child welfare system within the past 6 months

- Must be directly or indirectly responsible for and/or oversee federal policy design, review, or implementation within the respective child welfare agency

School Representatives

- Must have held a position within a public, private, or charter school within the past six months as educator, administrator, teaching assistant/support staff, counselor, family-child liaison, or other position as appropriate

- Must have working knowledge of federal education policies

Sample size for qualitative studies are often preemptively characterized as limited or insufficient (Vasilelou et al, 2018). However, researchers, Vasilelou et al (2018) and Hennink et al (2019) contend that sample size for qualitative interview-based studies should not be predicated on size but rather saturation parameters. Saturation, often referred to as data or thematic saturation, is viewed as the point in which issues identified during collection begin to be repeated and the need for continued data collection is unnecessary (Hennink et al, 2019 & Vasilelou et al, 2018). Demographic strata of focus group participants are also a factor to be considered with assessing size and saturation (Hennink et al, 2019). Thus, an appropriate mix of individuals with depth and breadth of federal education policy knowledge from each of the identified organizations and/or agencies made up the collective of interviewees and focus group participants. The initial goal was eight focus group participants and eight interviewees. Initial agreement of participation was received from a Director within Region 3 of Texas CPS and

individuals from various school districts. In efforts to ensure study efficacy, cohesion, and reliability of data the study participants for the focus group were limited to those within Region 10 TEA as the districts in Region 10 align closely with counties in Region 3 of TX DFPS. Thus, data collected should be reflective of practices implemented within the specific geographic region.

Figure 10

Map of TX DFPS Region 3 and Associated Counties

County	DFPS Region	APS District
Collin	3	DFW
Cooke	3	DFW
Dallas	3	DFW
Denton	3	DFW
Ellis	3	DFW
Erath	3	DFW
Fannin	3	DFW
Grayson	3	DFW
Hood	3	DFW
Hunt	3	DFW
Johnson	3	DFW
Kaufman	3	DFW
Navarro	3	DFW
Palo Pinto	3	DFW
Parker	3	DFW
Rockwall	3	DFW
Somervell	3	DFW
Tarrant	3	DFW
Wise	3	DFW
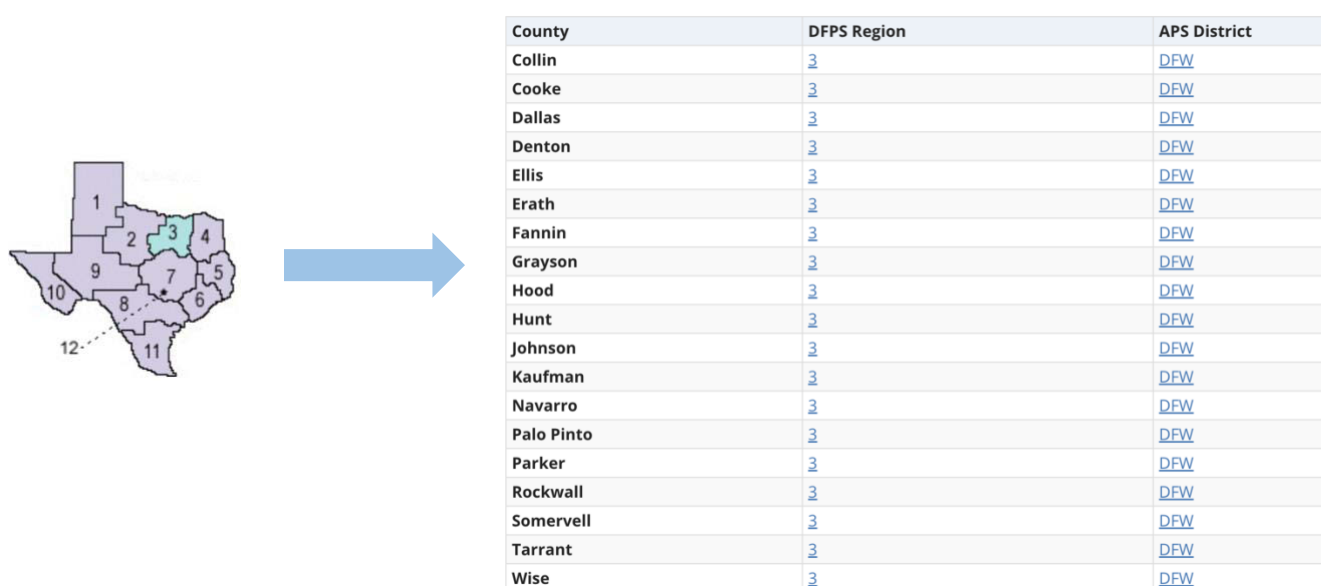
Note. A map and list of associated counties serviced by TX DFPS within Region 3. Adapted from *Counties in Region 3 – Arlington* by Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, (n.d.). (https://www.dfps.texas.gov/contact_us/counties.asp?r=3).

Figure 11

Map of Counties and School Districts in Region 10 of TEA

Note. The map above provides an overview of the counties and respective school districts within the Region 10 service area of the Texas Education Agency. Reprinted from *R10 Service Area Map* by Region 10 Education Service Center, (n.d.). (https://www.region10.org/region-10-onboarding/onboarding-course-files-pdfs/r10-service-area-map-image/).

The TX DFPS director that initially agreed to participate in the study sent a recruitment email to all employees within Region 3 and provided an introduction to senior level TX DFPS leadership. After a conversation outlining the objective of the study and the desired participants, the director disseminated the recruitment letter (Appendix A) to all within the agency. The study

involved participants from TX DFPS and school districts that were willing to voluntarily participate in the study. Voluntary participation reduces the potential for any job-related incentives or reprimands as a result of participation or lack thereof. As other researchers have experienced, recruiting participants within child welfare can be a challenge due to strenuous work demands, high caseloads, turnover, etc. (Glisson, 2006). As such, all study participants were incentivized for their time with e-gift cards that was electronically distributed via email following the interview and/or focus group. Many of the participants from TX DFPS opted to not receive an e-gift card for their time.

With the support and assistance of the director and by use of the purposive sampling method, the researcher was able to recruit more interviewees within TX DFPS than anticipated. Despite exceeding desired number of interview participants, the premise of the saturation concept became evident after only a small sample of interviews. Saturation early on is a common outcome when purposeful sampling takes place. By definition of purposeful sampling requirements, a set of criteria to be met by all participants thus subconsciously encouraging saturation (Guest et al, 2006; Fusch, & Ness, 2015).

Instrumentation

The Implementation Process Measure (IPM) is derived from the framework developed by the National Implementation Research Network (NRIN) and provided the foundation in conjunction with the policy implementation model for the questions used during semi-structured interviews (Armstrong et al, 2014). The framework identified key drivers that are instrumental to successful implementation for child welfare system change initiatives including: leadership, staffing, training, systems intervention, decision support, stakeholder engagement, and cultural responsiveness (Armstrong et al, 2014; Lambert et al, 2016; Weeks, 2021). Similarly, the policy

implementation model looks at key aspects that impact successful implementation of public policies (Edwards III, 1980; Mubarok et al, 2020). While the IPM tool is not specific to measuring policy implementation the objective of the tool is to measure the process for implementation which has overall influence on the child welfare system. The IPM tool requires each participant to first identify the state of intervention/implementation (i.e., exploration, early stage, initial early-stage implementation, or full implementation) followed a rating: (1) not yet in place, (2) initiated or partially in place or (3) fully in place for key implementation activities (Armstrong et al, 2014; Lambert et al, 2016). The IPM tool was not used in its entirety; however, questions were developed utilizing the IPM framework to set the foundation for identifying key drivers that had some level of impact on implementation of strategies for ESSA. A complete list of questions developed for the interviews and focus group utilizing the IPM tool and Edwards' policy implementation model as the foundation can be found in Appendices C and D.

Data Collection Procedures

Creswell (2018) contends that observations and interviews are the most common methods for data collection in any qualitative study. Semi-structured interviews with TX DFPS staff and a focus group of Region 10 TEA educational representatives were the primary methods for data collection in this study. Based on the nature of the study and the need to understand factors impacting implementation, interviews provided the best source of data. The interview protocol (including the questions) were tested by an initial pilot group that confirmed the interview questions were adequately worded and structured to answer the research question(s).

The data collection process began with the director sending an introductory email to identified individuals based on the aforementioned involvement criteria with information about the study including the study objective. The email contained contact information for the

researcher and a link to schedule the interview online. Potential participants in Region 10 TEA

were sent a different email with information pertaining specifically to the focus group including

date, time and Zoom link (see Appendix A and/or B for respective recruitment emails). Prior to

scheduling the interviews or participating in the focus group participants were required to agree

to the informed consent requirements. The informed consent section of the form was a modified

version of the informed consent template from Franklin University (see Appendix E and F for

respective informed consent forms). Once "I agree" was selected, participants were able to

proceed with selecting a day and time for the interview. Participants for the focus group were

then emailed login details for the online session. A confirmation email with a copy of the consent

form, scheduled date and time for either an interview or focus group, and details for the

respective session was sent to all participants. All interviews and the focus group took place

virtually over a 60-day period. The virtual interviews and the focus group session were

facilitated via the Zoom platform. The interview protocol described to all participants is listed

below:

- Welcome and introduction

- Review consent

- Overview of research study

- Outline agenda

- Begin interview

- Conclude interview

- Next steps

Protocol for the focus group varied slightly from the interviews and is outlined below:

- Welcome and introduction

- Review consent

- Overview of research study

- Outline agenda

- Begin focus group questions

- Conclude

- Next steps

It was anticipated that the semi-structured interviews would last no longer than 45 minutes and the focus group would last no longer than 60 minutes of which was the case in all scenarios. Although interviews only consisted of five questions (see Appendix E for interview protocol) the semi-structured nature allowed for flexibility in the schedule permitting themes and sub-topics to develop (Harvey-Jordan & Long, 2001). Harvey-Jordan and Long (2001) contend that conducting semi-structured interviews requires the researcher to have advanced knowledge of factors that could impact the success of the interview including limited time for interviews, technical issues, limited interviewee knowledge of the subject area, and/or guarded responses. In efforts to preemptively combat any issues reminder emails were sent 24 hours prior to scheduled interview time and technical devices were tested prior to start of the interview.

Data Security

Maintaining data security is a vital component to building rapport and trust between the researcher and study participants while also maintaining the integrity of the study (Barnhill & Barnhill, 2015). The research study followed Franklin University IRB's suggested data security guidelines pertaining to the use of data collection tools, passwords, encryption, recording and transcription, data transmission, and data storage (see Appendix G for IRB approval letter). All information collected from participants remained strictly confidential. In order to ensure

confidentiality and minimize the potential for any type of participant identification all participants were provided an alternative pseudonym that helped to further protect participant identity. After the collection of data, all de-identified participant information, recorded interviews, and transcribed data was stored online in a password-protected, cloud drive (i.e., Microsoft One Drive and/or Zoom Cloud) on a password protected computer. Only the researcher had password information to ensure the highest level of security and limit the risk of exposure to unauthorized persons (Barnhill & Barnhill, 2015). Any forms with participants' personal information (informed consent and survey scheduling form) were destroyed upon completion of the study.

Reliability and Validity

Anderson et al (2014) utilized the IPM tool in conjunction with the NRIN framework to understand implementation drivers of systematic change initiatives in over 270 child welfare jurisdictions. Results from the study completed by Anderson et al (2014) were deemed to be significant thus substantiating the reliability of the tool to measure drivers for implementation within child welfare. Furthermore, a group of individuals from agencies and school systems not part of the study served as content experts to review all questions for the semi-structured interviews and focus group. Any questions of which the experts took issue were to be removed from the study; however, there were no issues called out that needed to be addressed prior to initiating interviews with recruited participants.

Furthermore, validity of the study was strengthened through meticulous documentation of records, triangulation of data, and member checking (Harvey-Jordan & Long, 2001). Data was collected from participants through semi-structured interviews and a focus group. Semi-structured interviews were utilized to collect initial experiences pertaining to implementation of

key requirements of ESSA legislation from those within child welfare that were responsible for implementation. The information collected from the aforementioned interviews was triangulated with that from the focus group participants (i.e., school representatives) allowing for the convergence of information to create a comprehensive view of the phenomena (Carter et al, 2014). Triangulation of information between the child welfare agencies and their stakeholder partners further aided in the justification of themes and increased the validity of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Upon completion of all interviews and the focus group the information was coded into themes or larger concepts was sent back to participants for "member-checking" to verify the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Harvey-Jordan & Long, 2001).

Data Analysis Procedures

Transcription of recorded interviews was available through the Zoom software used for recording of the interviews and focus group. A combination of qualitative analysis software, Nvivo, and manual processes were used to code the interview and focus group responses notating any mentions of implementation drivers and key actions toward implementation of ESSA.

Upon completion of all data collection, the data analysis processes of Colaizzi (1978) were overlayed with that of Braun and Clarke (2006) to provide the foundation for which data was analyzed and potential themes discovered. Colaizzi's (1978) approach for data analysis is a seven-step process involving: 1) reading of documents and transcripts, 2) identifying key words and/or phrases, 3) establishing meanings, 4) categorizing themes, 5) providing a complete description of findings, 6) including a description of the fundamentals of the phenomena, and 7) member checking. Braun and Clarke (2006) dive deeper into specific aspects of the processes of thematic analysis.

Initial steps in the data analysis process involved reading over transcribed data from the interviews and focus group. Although all interviews were completed within a short amount of time, re-reading the transcripts helped to reestablish an understanding for the information that was collected. Simultaneously, the information contained in the reflective journal was reviewed to call out personal thoughts and feelings captured during the interview process and ensure focus on participant responses rather than personal perspectives. The second step involved more transcript review; however, the process of coding began. The thematic coding analysis methodology identified by Braun and Clarke (2006) was the basis for which the thematic data analysis was modeled. Braun and Clarke (2006) define thematic analysis as "a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patters (themes) within data" (p. 79) (Braun & Clarke, 2017). Braun and Clarke (2006) further outline steps or phases of analysis such as acquainting oneself with the data, developing initial codes, finding themes, reviewing themes, defining identified themes and generating a report. The steps detailed by Braun and Clarke's model for thematic analysis aided in the identification of themes. As such, upon another review of the transcripts, words and phrases that were reoccurring and linked to the research question(s) were identified as initial codes. During this time, a separate file serving as a coding journal was maintained in order to keep record of key examples in the transcripts that may be used as examples when writing the findings and recommendations. The third step in the process built on step two by aiming to develop broad meaning or themes from identified codes. An in-depth analysis of word and phrase definitions was conducted to ensure any meanings were in alignment with participant intentions and free of researcher perspective. One of the most important steps in the process included that which involved sorting the identified themes into categories. The basis for this process involved the use of a combination between axial and template coding. Blair

(2015) states that "the use of a combined approach inclusive of both template and axial coding limits bias as the two methods speak to one another" (p. 26). Template coding is described by Blair (2015) as the use of pre-defined themes also referred to as "priori codes" (p. 16) that emerge from the theory, literature review, and/or a combination of the two. The template coding method required the researcher to use a stepwise approach to first identify priori codes but also be open to a bottom-up perspective which recognizes codes that emerged from the data collection (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2017; Blaire, 2015). The continual refinement of themes was necessary to ensure they were in fact appropriate. Persistent consideration of the purpose of the study was critical to the refinement of themes (Blair, 2015).

The literature review (see Chapter 2) completed for the study revealed key themes related to the implementation of ESSA within child welfare agencies. As such, priori codes were assigned to reflect the themes: organizational readiness, agency collaboration, and federal funding. After establishing the priori codes, the coding journal was revisited to assign other identified themes to a priori. Most themes were able to fit into an identified priori theme. However, the bottom-up or axial approach was then used to identify themes that emerged directly from the data collected and did not fit with a priori theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2017; Blaire, 2015). The final steps in the process required the researcher to immerse themself in the data, reading and re-reading to ensure a thorough understanding and ensure all themes (priori and otherwise) were reflected and accounted for in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Kiger & Varpio, 2020). Any key responses were highlighted for direct quoting in later chapters, specifically, Data Analysis and Findings. A detailed analysis of the themes was drafted and discussed as part of the study results prospectively adding to and validating key factors that play a significant role in ESSA implementation for child welfare agencies and the perceptions of

implementation and collaboration between TX DFPS and school representatives in Region 10 TEA.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness within qualitative research studies is often a topic of contention for researchers. In efforts to ensure the credibility of contributions to the body of literature surrounding policy implementation within CWAs it is vital to guarantee trustworthiness of research processes and findings. Loh (2013) advises that trustworthiness happens when researchers are intentional about taking steps to enhance confirmability, transferability, credibility, and dependability of the study.

Transferability, Credibility, and Dependability

Researchers define transferability as the extent to which the research can be transferred from one population to another (Loh, 2013; Creswell, 2013; Creswell, 2018). Transferability is often a challenge with qualitative studies as the data is collected from a particular sample, often small in nature, and may not transfer to a larger population and/or one with different demographics (Loh, 2013). Providing the reader with an in-depth outline of the context of the study, creating a full and accurate depiction of the phenomena aids the researcher in establishing credibility in transferability. Thus, the researcher provided the reader with detailed information pertaining to the study context, background, participant selection, and data collection methods.

Credibility of research findings is another issue of trustworthiness that was vital for the researcher to address. Defined as the merge between research findings and intended measures of the study is credibility (Loh, 2013). As previously mentioned, the triangulation process converged the findings from different sources in efforts enhance validity of the research findings and create a deeper understanding of the study. For this study in particular, the findings from the

CWA interviews were triangulated against data collected from the focus group comprised of school representatives. Member checking was also a strategy used to enhance credibility of the study. Following the interviews with participants and completion of the focus group, any identified themes were sent back to the participants via email to confirm agreement and provide any additional feedback.

Lastly, saturation, or the point where no new information is obtained from interviews was considered (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Guest et al., 2006; Hennink et al, 2019; Vasilelou et al, 2018). In order to reach saturation, it was imperative that the researcher followed interview protocol and did not stray significantly from the questions developed from previously validated tools.

Summary

The study was designed to in efforts to understand factors that impact the implementation of ESSA. Using Edwards' policy implementation model and the general systems theory (GST), the goal was to show how various factors impact the implementation of federal education policy. Identifying such factors is critical for ongoing implementation and for CWAs to develop strategies to address limiting factors to implementation.

The chapter provided an in-depth analysis of the research design, rationale, data collection and analysis methods, and the elements that may have impacted the ethical nature of the study. The qualitative design method was optimal for this study because it allowed for the discovery of attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs of the research participants pertaining specifically to the phenomena around implementation of ESSA (Creswell, 2013; Creswell, 2018). Other study designs were reviewed for consideration and dismissed as the intended use of such studies did not align with the intentions of the study. Furthermore, research concerns related to researcher bias, reliability, validity, and trustworthiness were addressed and strategies to reduce

such research impediments were introduced in efforts to sustain scholarly credibility. Chapter 4 will present findings from the data collection.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Findings

The purpose of this study is to understand the critical factors that impact the implementation of federal education legislation, specifically the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), by exploring the experiences of stakeholders in the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (TX DFPS) and Region 10 of Texas Education Agency (TEA). The general systems theory (GST), in collaboration with Edwards' implementation model, provide frameworks to aid in understanding critical components of general policy implementation that can be applied to child welfare agencies (CWAs). Furthermore, the Implementation Process Measure (IPM) defines key components necessary for successful implementation of systems change in CWAs. The key factors outlined in the IPM aligned closely with concepts of the GST and implementation models, setting the groundwork for the questions asked of the interviewees and focus group participants and informing the analysis of the results.

Organizational leaders in education, particularly at the state and district levels, play a crucial role in translating federal policies like the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) into actionable plans. Effective leaders must first understand the policy's goals and requirements in order to develop strategies to implement them within their organizations. Second, they should focus on measurable student performance and well-being improvements, particularly for at-risk groups like foster youth. In order to track the educational trajectory and outcomes of foster youth, leaders need to implement robust data collection and analysis systems. Organizational leaders have a critical role in translating high-level policies into meaningful change at the ground level (Long, 2019; Williams, 2019).

A total of five questions were asked of interviewees. In comparison, focus group participants answered four questions in an effort to help the researcher understand the experiences of each participant as it relates to the implementation of ESSA.

Research Question

The research questions guiding this study are:

RQ 1: What are critical factors impacting the implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) between the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (TX DFPS) and education professionals in school districts within Region 10 of the Texas Education Agency (TEA)?

RQ 2: What are the experiences of stakeholders (i.e., caseworkers, supervisors, program managers, and administrators) within the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (TX DFPS) concerning collaboration in relation to the implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)?

RQ 3: What are the experiences of stakeholders (i.e., teachers, counselors, and principals) within Region 10 Texas Education Agency (TEA) concerning collaboration in relation to the implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)?

Data Collection

The data collection process took place over the course of a four-month period (December – March, 2023). Prior to data collection, the researcher recruited interview participants from the Region 13 TX DFPS offices. Through a collective of purposive and snowball sampling, a total of eight interview participants agreed to move forward in the process. Safeguard measures were put into place to ensure confidentiality and deidentification of participants. Zoom interviews of about

45 minutes were completed with each participant and all interviews were recorded and transcribed. Saturation was reached after interviewing the first six participants; however, all eight participants were interviewed to ensure the data collected was adequate for developing themes and adequately captured the experiences of those interviewed relative to the implementation of ESSA.

Following the interviews, a single focus group was conducted with six participants recruited from various schools and administrative offices from Region 10 TEA. Initially, eight individuals agreed to participate, but only six showed up for the session. The session was conducted via Zoom, and similar to the interviews, all participant information was deidentified. The focus group participants' questions differed from the interview questions in an attempt to validate findings from the TX DFPS interviews and alternative perspectives of stakeholders in Region 10 TEA.

Demographics

The collected demographics of the participants of both the interviews and focus group were minimal in efforts to maintain a level of confidentiality that was promised to all participants of the study. The demographics of the eight interview participants and six focus group participants are provided below. The group of interviewees ranged from those directly involved with ESSA to leaders in middle to senior level management with knowledge of but not practical experience with ESSA. The inclusion of data from individuals of varying positions and leadership levels allows for a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena from distinctive perspectives (Lambert et al., 2016).

The data lacked the perspective of senior leadership at the state level. As the data reveals, state level leaders play a significant role in the implementation of federal policies, thus

presenting a potential limitation of the study results. Also of note is the length of time in which study participants were with their respective organizations. Four of the eight interviewees had been with TX DFPS for over 20 years, while only two participants had two years or less experience. On the contrary, the focus group consisted of educational representatives, and only one participant had more than 20 years of experience with the organization.

A national study by Barth et al. (2008) looked at child welfare workforce characteristics and job satisfaction. The study pointed out that 72% of the child welfare workforce is female. The percentage of female to male participants in this study largely mimics the gender makeup of the child welfare workforce (Barth et al., 2008). In this study, females made up 78.6% (11 out of 14) of the participants, and males 21.4% (3 out of 14).

Amongst interviewees, African American was the most frequent ethnicity, representing half (50%) of the participants, while Caucasian and Hispanic had equal representation, each appearing twice (25% each). With only eight participants, limited conclusions can be drawn, which may not be representative of a larger population. Amongst focus group participants, African American was again the most frequent ethnicity, representing half (50%) of the participants, and Hispanic was the least represented ethnicity (16.7%). Caucasian participants made up one-third (33.3%) of the sample. Tables 3 and 4 below provide an overview of the participant demographics for both the interviews and the focus group.

Table 3

Demographics of Semi-Structured Interviewees

Participant Number	Gender	Ethnicity	Role	Time with Organization	Direct Reports
1	Female	African American	Program Director	23 years	Yes
2	Female	Caucasian	Supervisor	22 years	Yes
3	Male	Hispanic	Educational Specialist	2 months	No
4	Female	Hispanic	Educational Specialist	2 years	No
5	Female	African American	Resource Specialist	33 years	No
6	Female	African American	Regional Director	22 years	Yes
7	Male	African American	Supervisor	6 years	Yes
8	Female	Caucasian	Caseworker	11 years	No

Table 4

Demographics of Focus Group Participants

Focus Group Participants

Participant Number	Gender	Ethnicity	Role	Time with Organization
1a	Female	African American	Education Liaison	25 years
2a	Female	African American	School Counselor	8 years
3a	Female	Caucasian	Teacher	10 years
4a	Male	African American	Assistant Principal	3 years
5a	Female	Caucasian	Education Liaison	1 year
6a	Male	Hispanic	Teacher	2 years

Results

    The results of the analyzed and coded transcripts provided impactful insight related to the experiences of TX DFPS and Region 10 TEA employees in relation to the implementation of

ESSA. The themes derived from the analysis present consistent thoughts and perceptions from individuals from both organizations. Table 5 below presents the themes and sub-themes that emerged in response to the questions presented. Differing themes and sub-themes emerged in response to each research question guiding the study. Each of the themes and sub-themes presented are interconnected in their relationship and influence on the implementation of ESSA. An overview of each theme and sub-theme with corresponding direct quotes from the interviewees and participants further illustrates the significance of the coded theme(s).

Table 5

Major Themes and Sub-Themes for Research Questions

RQ 1 - Theme 1: Effective, Engaged, and Empathetic Leadership is Key to Implementation Success
Sub-Themes
#1 Leadership "Trickle-Down" Effect
#2 Organizational Response to Change Driven by Leader Approach
RQ 1 - Theme 2: Availability of "The Right" Resources
Sub-Themes
#1 Limited Availability
#2 Inadequacy of Resources
RQ 2 - Theme 3: Training, Training, and More Training…Modality and Frequency
Sub-Themes
#1 System Interventions
#2 Frequency and Effectiveness of Training
RQ 2 - Theme 4: Communication is Critical
Sub-Themes
#1 Timing and Consistency
#2 Understanding and Communicating The "Why"
RQ 3 - Theme 5: Collaboration, Accountability, and Perspective are Vital ingredients to The Success and Stability of Implementation
Sub-Themes
#1 Building and Maintaining Relationships
#2 Accountability Despite Change
#3 Perspective Matters
Theme 6: The Influence of Politics and Finances on Implementation Efforts is Unavoidable
Sub-Themes
#1 Convergence of Legislative Actions to Meet the Need
#2 Data Tracking and Reporting Driven by Funding

Theme 1: (Effective, Engaged, and Empathetic) Leadership is Key to Implementation Success

The first theme that emerged in response to RQ1 explores the importance of leadership in relation to implementation success. Participants highlighted the influence of leadership on the implementation of ESSA. The sub-themes derived from this theme: (1) Leadership "Trickle-Down" Effect, and (2) Organizational Response to Change Driven by Leadership, explore specific leadership actions and subsequent responses impacting implementation at a systems level.

Sub-Theme 1: Leadership "Trickle-Down" Effect. The first sub-theme, Leadership "Trickle-Down" Effect, was derived from participant responses noting the tendencies of leaders to cascade information and changes using a top-down approach. Whether from a direct supervisor or the often referenced "state office", participants alluded to directives for implementation being developed and mandated by leadership. Participant Six, a regional director with TX DFPS, described the cascade by noting:

Ironically most information is always cascaded down from leadership when it relates to the implementation of changes. Things are "trickle-down" to us and things are developed from the lens of those up top and not those on the ground, it seems there is no consideration or even ask of the field staff on how we can do things effectively or even just how to do something since we are in it daily.

Participants continued to reflect on their experiences related to directives of implementation measures. Participant Three notes, "The person in the state office is not like our direct supervisor, but they are the person in charge of developing any plans around education laws or rules. It's like they are in charge, and they just tell us what to do". While there was consensus among the participants relative to the "trickle-down" approach, some participants went on to note

the process by which information is cast down. Participant One drew attention to the process when new legislation comes outs "our director typically brings it to her supervisors. Then they cascade to the rest of their teams." Participant Three, a caseworker, adds to this by noting:

> My boss, she reads up on the internal communication as well as the law and makes sure she understands it. Then she breaks it down into microsegments for her team to ensure they understand. She always makes herself knowledgeable and answers our questions.

There seemed to be cohesion among the participants that information is often cascaded down from leadership within the organization. Participant One, a program director, noted a similar experience:

> We are required to go over any changes with our Regional Director (my boss) and then cascade them down to our supervisors and staff. We meet with the Regional Director on average twice a month and then meet with our direct reports that much or more.

Participant One went on to express concerns with the cascading of directives and disregarding the voices of lower-level employees, stating:

> I don't know that in my role I have a choice or a say in things because everything is always a priority and needs to be tackled immediately. Senior leadership has already weighed in, so I just have to make sure my staff is following the directive.

Participant Seven provides a similar viewpoint and speaks to the idea of providing feedback stating:

> The upper echelon leadership typically creates the plans. My leader, however, is good about bringing something to us and allowing us to weigh in and provide feedback and then she takes that back to the powers that be. What happens with the feedback we don't

know but we respect that we at least have the opportunity to weigh in even if only to our direct leader.

Sub-Theme 2: Organizational Response to Change Driven by Leader Approach. As the participants continued to share their experiences with the cascading of directives from leadership, it led to the development of sub-theme two: Organizational Response to Change Driven by Leader Approach. Participants begin to share experiences of their response to varying leadership approaches pertaining to the implementation of new policies. Participant One, a program director, states, "My staff complains about leadership when they don't understand but mandate change. They aren't familiar with the requirements themselves. It makes my staff resistant to the change." She continues by adding an experience with her supervisor and how it makes her staff feel "our regional director is very hands on. She tries to help me and my staff and will even step in when we need her or if we don't understand. When my staff sees her helping they feel more positive." Likewise, Participant Eight, a caseworker, and Participant Five, a resource specialist, shared similar sentiments:

Participant Eight stating:

Leadership often cascades information down to our caseworkers. We can often tell if a leader is knowledgeable on the topic and has taken time to learn or if they are just reading the memo. I don't think that our leaders understand that when they don't know the information we can tell. It gives us the feeling as if it's not important enough for them to know then we don't need to either.

Participant Five stating:

I have been through a lot of leaders in my years with the organization. From my experience we have a much better success rate with changes and implementing new

things when the leaders act as if they care, and they are knowledgeable on the topic. And

not that they just read a memo and are trying to recite it back to us.

Leadership knowledge and engagement in key implementation endeavors are observed by staff

and ultimately seem to influence the engagement level of staff when it comes to supporting

implementation efforts. Following the interviews with TX DFPS, a focus group took place with

individuals from the Texas Education Agency (TEA) Region 10. Participant 5a, a school-based

education liaison, expressed her experience with TX DFPS supporting the idea that engaged

leaders encourage engaged staff:

> There is an education specialist appointed by the regional director that is always willing
>
> to connect and collaborate. I am not sure the correlation but the regions with the engaged
>
> specialist seem to also have engaged leadership as well. There have been instances where
>
> the regional leader has reached out to me just to check-in and see how things were going.
>
> This is certainly not the case often.

Additionally, participants continued describing their response to varying leader approaches to

implementation making a connection between leadership and their influence on organizational

culture surrounding implementation efforts. Participant Seven, a TX DFPS supervisor, noted:

> Leadership is often an obstacle when we are working to implement new policies because
>
> they have this perception of how things should be done versus how things truly are from
>
> the frontline perspective. It's like they are disconnected from the true culture of the
>
> organization.

Participant Six, a regional director, shared similar sentiments:

> It feels like because things happen in a manner that things are trickled down to us and
>
> things are developed from the lens of those up top and not those on the ground, it seems

there is no consideration or even ask of the field staff on how we can do things

effectively. Especially when it comes to systematic changes or policy changes which

happen often. So, it creates this subconscious organizational divide between the leaders

and the workers. As someone in the middle I understand the caseworker perspective

because I did it many years and its sad upper leadership doesn't realize how their actions

or inaction impact the culture and the desire to follow-through on the ask. Ultimately, it's

their butt on the line when the caseworkers don't implement correctly, report metrics, etc.

Theme 2: Availability of "The Right" Resources

The second major theme derived from data collection was the focus on resource

availability and, more specifically, the availability of the right resources. Particularly, the major

theme, Availability of "The Right" Resources, included the sub-themes of Limited Resource

Availability and Inadequacy of Resources. A similar thought was shared as participants in

varying roles shared their thoughts on the availability of resources. Participant One stated her

experience as a program director having to implement ESSA mandates with limited resources:

> Sometimes the mandates that come require us to take on additional responsibilities. For
>
> instance, with ESSA, we didn't initially have enough staff to have dedicated education
>
> liaisons to cover for the region, so we had caseworkers doing their job and the job of the
>
> liaisons.

Participant Eight, a caseworker, describes a similar experience from a different perspective but

still relates to the lack of available resources to support the implementation:

> It's just a "get it done mindset" is what it seems. The more they tell us we have to do in
>
> relation to new laws, the more we have to do. Once we start getting things done (as we

are told) it's like they think "oh they can handle it" and request for additional help to do what the laws call for are ignored.

As participants continued to describe the influence of resources on implementation the sub-theme of inadequacy of available resources became evident. Participant One explains her perspective as a director with not having resources versus being supplied inadequate resources:

Everyone knows the lack of resources has always been a challenge and certainly wasn't fixed with ESSA despite roles and responsibilities being specifically called out. Resources are a big issue for me. Not having them is the problem most of the time but leaders don't realize the strain it puts on the team when the resources are inadequate.

Two participants describe their experiences collaborating with school districts relative to ESSA implementation. Participant Three states:

There are some districts that are difficult to work with. Sometimes it's a staff member that is thrown into the role and really doesn't even understand what they are responsible for. I have to get principals or leadership involved. There have even been times where I literally had to send a copy of the ESSA legislation to them, so they know what they are responsible for.

While Participant Five expounds on a similar experience:

Every school district has a foster care liaison because they are mandated by law to have one. The thing is that some districts have a foster care liaison that is strictly the foster care liaison and those are usually the ones that are amazing. You can reach out for help, and they will help you and provide the necessary support to get the issue resolved. Then there are other districts that have a foster care liaison, and they are a teacher, counselor,

or some other role. You are lucky if you even get a response. You have to send multiple

requests before you hear back.

Participant Seven's reflection provides a perspective that accurately summarizes the perspective

of those interviewed. He states:

There is a lot missing in terms of ensuring the workers are supported and they have what

they need to carry out the requirements of ESSA. Often, we are not given the adequate

resources needed to be successful which impacts our ability to do our job but has ultimate

impact on the kids.

Theme 3: Training, Training, and More Training…Modality and Frequency

Interview question two asked participants to describe methods used to support

implementation strategies for federal education policies. Participants responded with a myriad of

interventions and models that were systematically developed to educate, prepare, and equip

participants for the implementation of ESSA. From the participant responses, the sub-theme of

Systematic Interventions was developed. Systematic interventions are "purposeful action by an

agent to create change" (Midgley & Rajagopalan, 2021, p. 14). In response to ESSA

implementation, participants described various system actions aimed at ensuring proper

preparation for ESSA. Participant One starts by expressing that with change comes some form of

training, "most of the time, with any change, it's going to come with some sort of mandatory

training." She goes on to describe the interventions for which she was familiar:

We have 'The Academy' which is a separate team and institute that only handles any in-

person trainings and/or organizational webinars. On the other hand, we either get a direct

email (depending on urgency) or what we call 'meeting-in-a-box'. We receive these

monthly and it's usually where all the changes are located. The changes are categorized

so you know what is applicable to you, but you also know what may be changing for other areas within DFPS. There is also a general section for any information that is applicable to everyone. The 'meeting-in-a-box' started with ESSA as there were so many changes for various divisions that it was starting to become a challenge trying to ensure everyone received the necessary information.

Participant Three, an education specialist, listed all the forms of training that were offered during the development and implementation of ESSA, "we offer so many types of training, it's hard for someone to ever say they weren't trained on something. There are in-person, webinars, computer-based, emails or 'meetings-in-a-box', and more." ESSA required collaboration of CWAs and educational systems thus some systematic changes impacted both organizations. Participant 2a, a school counselor, advises how ESSA caused them to explore new training methods:

A few years ago, we started collaborating with TX DFPS on trainings just focused on current laws and policies. The trainings bring together TX DFPS and education professionals in the same place to educate and allow for dialogue on how to work together.

Continued discussion with the group encouraged participants to explore specific interventions that had been collaboratively developed as a result of ESSA implementation. Participant 1a and 5a, education liaisons, describe their experiences:

We developed what we call 'stability letters' to help keep the kids stable. The letter uses key words pulled directly from the legislation, like *school of origin*, so that the request and requirement is clear. The format is standard, and it helps us to ensure nothing in missed in communications especially since we understand there are issues with people

constantly changing in both organizations. This helps us to ensure we are always on the same page and speaking the same language.

Participant 5a added, "we work to put into action a one-pager after major legislation is released called 'education legislation corner' so we can ensure all key information is getting to the necessary parties." Participant 4a advises of his training experience as assistant principal specifically noting the intentionality of ensuring TX DFPS partners are invited and included:

We started doing huddles that we conduct monthly to review ESSA updates and other education law requirements to ensure we are maintaining our compliance. We are intentional about ensuring an invite is sent to our CPS (TX DFPS) contact(s) and at least one representative is included in our huddles.

Continued dialogue with the interview participants encouraged participants to explore the frequency and effectiveness of system interventions and trainings. Many of the TX DFPS participants expressed similar thoughts to that of Participant One, the director, who spoke about the frequency of training stating:

We know that we are going to spend at least five hours every month in some form of training whether an individual, group, or with your direct leader. There are many options to ensure you have a good grip on the changes.

Participant Eight, a caseworker, provided sentiments from a frontline perspective:

As a caseworker, I feel like I am in a constant state of training in one way or another but because there are various forms of training offered, I don't get bored with it quite as easily. Ultimately, I have more confidence that I am informed and know what I am speaking and acting on.

Despite differing perspectives, leaders versus frontline, it was evident from the participant responses that the frequency of training was not a hindrance because the participants felt educated and equipped for the respective implementation. Participant Three, an educational specialist in the system, provides sentiments noting his appreciation for the systematic intervention, 'meeting-in-a-box':

> I do at least 2-3 trainings a month. One of these is always the 'meeting-in-a-box'. It's a lot doing 2-3 trainings each month, but I appreciate it because I feel like I get the opportunity to really understand the information. The 'meeting-in-a box' is effective because I know when and what to expect with them. I am prepared for the changes to come with ESSA implementation or any other implementation.

Participant responses confirmed the development of systematic interventions within each organization. The collaborative intentionality of ESSA suggested both organizations be trained and prepared for implementation. As a result, Participant Four describes one intervention that brought together all parties to ensure collaboration and consistency:

> We started holding consortiums for the region. All the agencies, schools, community partners come together, and we talk about what's going on, new policies, updates, educational stuff. We open it to anyone from the schools and are intentional about ensuring the foster care liaisons/champions are included. This is just one of many efforts to keep us on the same page.

Theme 4: Communication is Critical

Communication and its critical nature pertaining to implementation efforts presented as the fourth major theme. As participants of both the interviews and the focus group spoke to the importance of communication, there were multiple references to (1) Timing and Consistency and

(2) Understanding and Communicating The 'Why', which emerged as sub-themes. Although no singular interview or focus group question concentrated on the impact of communication relative to implementation, the responses collected from participants speak to the significance of communication in preparation for and during implementation. Participant One, the program director, speaks to consistency in communication that comes with the previously mentioned systematic intervention, 'meeting-in-a-box':

> Most of the time the 'meeting in a box' comes at the beginning of the month. Sometimes it varies and comes toward the end but no matter when it comes, we know that it is coming. We rely on it as our form of communication for all the updates we need to be aware of, especially those that are pertinent to our section, that we should know.

Meanwhile, participant 4a, assistant principal, stated during the focus group:

> There is always a new rule or policy that we are required to know and implement. Each region and even district leader handles implementations differently especially when the law doesn't provide clear instructions. ESSA said we should work together but didn't prescribe the plan or the how. So, communication within the region, district, and school has been vital. We get updates often and because the communication is standardized, we can ensure that we are receiving the same information. Thus, even though ESSA did not prescribe the plan, we have one and it's clear because there is consistency in the communication we receive.

Further exploration of the critical nature of communication unveiled the sentiment from participants that understanding and communicating 'why' is just as important, if not more important. Participant Seven described how he used the 'meeting-in-a-box' to communicate with his staff and ensure they understand the need for change and implementation of new practices:

The 'meeting in a box' is just an email that you just really read. I make it a point to meet with my reports every time a 'meeting in a box' comes out. Sometimes we meet for two-three hours at a time just so I can make sure they understand what they are reading, why it's important, and what's required of them. If they don't have a solid understanding, it's hard to embrace all the change(s) that come their way with all the new policies that come out so often. Not to mention, they won't be able to understand the ultimate impact on the kids.

Participant Six shared her experience as a regional director, taking time to understand new requirements herself so that she can communicate to her staff as she recognizes the implications of her staff being informed as well:

I often spend a lot of time reading and researching because as a director you have to make sure you understand so you can communicate that to your staff. If you don't understand why the change is happening, then it's challenging for your team to embrace it. If they don't embrace it, they won't do it!

Likewise, Participant 1a from the focus group describes an experience partnering with a dedicated supervisor that exhibits the importance of a complete understanding. She states:

One of our partners is a supervisor and has plenty to do but makes it a point to help where needed because she understands why we are doing this in the first place. It's for the kids and she is not shy about making sure we know this as well. She will tell you it's what keeps her motivated to do the job despite constant change and inconsistences that can be highly frustrating.

Throughout the interviews the notion of communication presented itself in such a manner that its importance was not only revered but so was the concept of communicating the importance of the implementation efforts.

Theme 5: Collaboration, Accountability, and Perspective are Vital Ingredients to The Success and Stability of Implementation

Responses collected from participants of TX DFPS, as well as those within Region 10 TEA, expressed the importance of collaboration during implementation and maintenance. Not only did participants speak to collaboration but also the need to uphold accountability and see things from the perspective of their partners during and after implementation. As a result, sub-themes (1) Building and Maintaining Relationships, (2) Accountability Despite Change, and (3) Perspective Matters were identified.

Sub-Theme 1: Building and Maintaining Relationships. Participants from TX DFPS and Region 10 both acknowledged the importance of building and maintaining relationships during and beyond implementation of ESSA. Participant Eight, a TX DFPS caseworker, describes her perspective and what she does to maintain her relationships:

Maintaining a relationship with your community partner, especially educators, is so critical. I often set myself reminders to do a quick call, email, or, if possible, a pop in at the school just so they know I am here when they need me and the lines of communication are open. It's like whether we say it out loud or not, we all know we couldn't do this alone.

Participant One expresses a similar sentiment towards community partners:

We do have and maintain good relationships not only with the schools but with other community partners. ESSA has encouraged (and required) us and the schools to engage

community stakeholders more. It's good because we stay on top of all the changes the

law requires and because of our relationships if something will affect others, we notify

them and they do the same for us. ESSA has been the catalyst for us to create a more

open environment.

An education specialist only two months into his role recalls his experiences in trying to build

relationships with the education liaisons within various school districts:

I see a difference between school districts. Most are willing to work with me and all it

takes to get things going is a simple email. We all know it's important to maintain those

type of relationships because not all are like this. But when they work out it makes

working together just that much easier.

An education liaison from a Region 10 schools describes a similar experience from the

perspective of a school representative working with individuals in TX DFPS. She recalls:

Surprisingly, I have supervisors that I keep in contact with along with caseworkers that

support my region and other regions. I make it a point to maintain contact with

individuals in different agencies that support us. It's critical that we maintain these

relationships because while ESSA is specific about our roles most policies are not and we

find ourselves trying to determine who is responsible for what. A good relationship

makes that a lot easier.

Sub-Theme 2: Accountability Despite Change. In response to the question asked of

both TX DFPS and TEA representatives about their perceptions of collaboration in relation to

ESSA implementation, many participant responses focused on the idea of accountability to their

partners in times of constant change. Participant One describes change as "the biggest challenge

we face." She goes on to state, "there is always change, even if the change comes at a cost for us." Participant Two describes more in-depth her experiences as a leader:

> More government agencies, like ourselves, are reactive. We are not super proactive thus we react to problems brought to us which includes new rulings that have to be implemented like yesterday. Even though with ESSA they gave us ample time to develop an implementation plan (and do it) we always react! Thus, we are always in a constant state of change. We change timelines, how we do things, how information will go out, etc.. which could be (and probably is) confusing and tiring for staff. But more than just for our staff it has an impact on our partners. Our partners need to be able to rely on us to know what's going on and with the constant change that becomes a greater challenge.

Participant Eight adds:

> It's almost an unwritten requirement to know what's going on in all areas or even how change in other areas will impact you because there is constant change all over the agency. It's hard to keep up but you need to try because others outside the organization rely on us.

Despite the state of constant change that participants expressed, the notion of accountability to partners remained. Participant 5a, a Region 10 TEA education liaison, describes his sentiments related to being accountable to partners:

> We are required to cover the entire state and keep everyone engaged and involved. We definitely need more hands to be accountable to our responsibilities to our partners. With the numbers we have now, it's hard because a small group of people can't do everything, but we must. We've advocated for the resources and haven't gotten them but that doesn't mean we can or will slack on our role. Our partners expect it.

An education specialist with TX DFPS shares similar thoughts pertaining to accountability to her TEA partners:

> We are accountable to our partners to know the legislation and its requirements. Specifically, I often find myself navigating terrain with leaders and partners that are unfamiliar of all components of ESSA. That's not something I can blame them for as it may or may not be their responsibility, but I know for myself I am responsible and accountable to ensure I know, and they can rely on me.

Overall, this sub-theme explored the perceptions and impact of constant change and the participant's ability to maintain a level of accountability to their partners. There was consensus among participants from both organizations that accountability to partners is critical to policy implementation, particularly ESSA.

Sub-Theme 3: Perspective Matters. The third sub-theme that emerged from the major theme, Collaboration, Accountability, and Perspective are Vital Ingredients to The Success and Stability of Implementation, was that of Perspective Matters. Participants agreed that it is often assumed that partners do not want to collaborate, but the reality is different from the assumption. Participants described having numerous roles and responsibilities which impacted their ability to collaborate in the most effective manner. Participant 4a, assistant principal, describes the many roles that his education liaisons have:

> Our current educational liaisons support thousands of kids from kindergarten – high school; however, working with TX DFPS is not the only role for our liaisons. TX DFPS often isn't aware of our many roles. I often get calls from caseworkers informing me that someone is unresponsive or hasn't worked with them to handle a situation for a child. I find myself often apologizing on their behalf and informing the caseworkers that the

intent is to collaborate but due to various reasons they must maintain other roles within

the district.

Participant 3a, a Region 10 teacher, shares an alternative viewpoint from her perspective:

I see things through a different perspective. Sometimes we work well together and are in

great harmony but other times we forget to respect the challenges of the others' role(s).

As a teacher, I don't have a choice but to respect the challenges and roles of others

because, I often find myself having to step in and do the job of either or both the social

worker and the educator to help the kids even though ESSA is very clear on

responsibilities. ESSA is very clear we must maintain a level of accountability to our

peers, partners, and the kids.

Based on participant responses, it appears that perspective is critical throughout policy

implementation as it allows working partners to understand varying viewpoints while still

maintaining a level of accountability to the person and the process.

Theme 6: The Influence of Politics and Finances on Implementation Efforts is Unavoidable

As participants described their knowledge of ESSA and how ESSA was used in their

respective roles, it was increasingly evident how previous legislative rulings interplayed with

ESSA. Consequently, a sub-theme, Convergence of Legislative Actions to Meet the Need, was

developed. Similarly, data was frequently mentioned when asked about various factors that

impacted implementation, specifically in relation to funding requirements. As such, the second

sub-theme emerged: Data Tracking and Reporting Linked to Funding.

Sub-Theme 1: Convergence of Legislative Actions to Meet the Need. ESSA was not

the first legislative ruling aimed at improving the educational experiences of foster and

disadvantaged youth. As such, participants often spoke to components of other rulings such as

Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), No Child Left Behind (NCLB), McKinney

Veto, and even the Texas Family Code in conjunction with ESSA to achieve optimal student

support. Participant 2a, a school counselor, recounts:

> ESSA came out in 2015 and had to be implemented years later but the thing people don't
>
> realize is that part of our job is to be familiar with educational law, special education law
>
> and any other legislation that supports foster youth.

Participant 4a, assistant principal, shared similar thoughts, "knowing the law, not just ESSA, and

how to navigate is a supercritical component of our job. We often have to reference multiple

laws to get what we need for a child." Participant 1a, education liaison with Region 10, recalls an

experience in which she had to fight to maintain a school of origin for a child as specifically

referenced in ESSA:

> There was an instance recently in which I had to fight the district to maintain the school
>
> of origin for the child. I literally had to reference aspects of McKinney Veto, NCLB, and
>
> ESSA just to take care of one child. It's like every time a new law or rule comes out, we
>
> have to learn it but can't forget the previous or any others because there is always some
>
> aspect that is helpful our partners we work with don't always keep up with new
>
> legislation.

In a similar line of thinking, Participant Three, the education specialist with TX DFPS, called

stated:

> ESSA is probably the policy we work with the most especially working with the foster
>
> kids and schools because we try to keep kids in their school of origin. That's the central
>
> policy but I also must know and have had to reference the 504 Act [section 504 of the

Rehabilitation Act of 1973] and Individuals with Disabilities Act [Individuals with

Disabilities Education Act].

Participant Eight, a caseworker with TX DFPS, recalls her experiences with federal legislation

and state-based family code:

Even though ESSA is federal, many federal requirements are written into the Texas

Family Code which helps us to maintain requirements, implementation timelines, and

doubly ensure we are following the rules. As caseworkers it's easier for us to reference

Family Code when we are dealing with many situations, but it doesn't exclude us from

ensuring we are knowledgeable of other rulings that can help out a child.

The influence and cross referencing of various legislative and state-based codes with ESSA to

meet the needs of the child presented itself as sub-theme critical to the implementation and

stability of ESSA.

Sub-theme 2: Data Tracking and Reporting Driven by Funding. The availability, use,

and reporting of data was another key factor identified by participants as having an influence on

ESSA implementation. Participants alike expressed the need for data reporting noting, "data is

vital to everything we do. Everything has to be tracked in some manner." Participant Two, a

supervisor with TX DFPS, describes the various data tracking mechanisms used:

We have all kinds of tracking forms that we use. There are excel spreadsheets, paper

forms, online systems. Links to all tracking forms are located the 'meeting in a box' so

it's nice to have an integrated system that keeps track of these things for us.

She also emphasizes that tracking is often associated with funding

A lot of what we track, pretty much everything, is in some way linked to funding. It

seems if there are no funds attached, we aren't tracking! ESSA is no different. It's a fairly

new legislation that was implemented and now requires tracking on our part in order to

receive the associated funds.

Participant Two was not alone in her sentiments as Participant Six, regional director, expressed

similar sentiments:

Most (if not all) of our critical changes, critical tasks, anything critical that needs to be

tracked is tied to money. Majority of our funding is federal funding, so we have several

tasks that are strictly related to money. We have a benchmark or a goal that is provided to

us that we must maintain in order to get that money. ESSA is federal requirement but

when there is no money associated with a ruling, it's slow to be implemented within the

agency. Data tracking for ESSA did not become important until the funding indicators

and associated timelines were clearly called out.

Participant Four, the education specialist, expresses thoughts from her perspective regarding the

role of the state office in the development of data tracking mechanisms:

Anything that is tied to money has to be tracked. They [state office] figure out a way.

There is a data warehouse system that was created at the state office level, and they create

the tracking points, the tracking mechanism, implement it, and then send it out to us.

Participant One, program director, expressed distrust of the data advising:

I don't trust that the data is always accurate. The data is always lagging like a month or

two behind but somehow when there is a report due or money on the line the data seems

to be available immediately.

Overall, participants shared comparable thoughts related to the link between data and funding.

From the participants experience, it seemed data was only important and available when funding

was attached.

Summary of Results

This study aimed to explore the critical factors that impacted the implementation efforts of ESSA from the child welfare perspective. The research questions were designed to help the researcher understand the experiences of stakeholders within TX DFPS and Region 10 TEA pertaining to agency collaboration during implementation. Participant responses from data collection resulted in the emergence of six core themes depicting critical factors and collaborative efforts surrounding ESSA implementation. The first core theme *Effective, Engaged, and Empathetic Leadership is Key to Implementation Success*, highlighted the importance of implementation efforts. Secondly, the core theme, *Availability of "The Right" Resources*, explored the resource shortages and inadequacies presented during implementation. The third theme, *Training, Training, and More Training…Modality and Frequency* investigated systematic interventions and training modalities put into place in preparation for ESSA. The next theme, *Communication is Critical*, explored the importance of communication and ensuring individuals understand the *why* behind the legislation and implementation efforts. The fifth core theme that emerged from participant responses was that of *Collaboration, Accountability, and Perspective are Vital Ingredients to The Success and Stability of Implementation*. This theme explored the notion of collaboration and accountability that was upheld from participants from both TX DFPS and TEA. The final theme that emerged from the data, *The Influence of Politics and Finances on Implementation Efforts if Unavoidable*, considered how previous legislation often converges with ESSA to meet the needs of the youth. The link between data reporting and funding also emerged from this theme.

The first core theme *Effective, Engaged, and Empathetic Leadership is Key to Implementation Success* explored the critical role of leaders in effective implementation.

Leadership, in some form, was mentioned in participant comments for each of the derived core themes (i.e., training, resource availability, collaboration, accountability, data, and finances) and provides crucial lessons for organizational leaders tasked with managing large-scale policy changes. The study's identification of six core themes underscores the complex nature of successful policy implementation, with leadership emerging as a central and pervasive factor.

The emphasis on *Effective, Engaged, and Empathetic* leadership highlights that leaders must embody specific qualities and behaviors beyond mere positional authority to drive successful implementation. This finding is particularly relevant for organizational leaders as it suggests that their approach and characteristics can significantly influence the entire organization's response to new initiatives. Moreover, the study's focus on inter-agency collaboration, resource allocation, training methodologies, communication strategies, and the impact of political and financial factors provides a comprehensive framework for leaders to consider when planning and executing major organizational changes.

This chapter provided an overview of the data collected giving a preview into the key factors influencing the implementation of ESSA. The findings were developed based on participant experiences and perspectives pertaining to ESSA implementation and agency collaboration. Chapter Five will provide an interpretation of the findings and compare results to existing literature surrounding federal education implementation in CWAs, as previously discussed in Chapter Two. The chapter will include implications from a practical and theoretical perspective, study limitations, and recommendations for future research. In addition, a guideline will be included providing best-practice recommendations to state-based CWAs for future federal education legislation implementation.

Chapter 5: Discussion of Results, Implications, and Recommendations

This study set out to understand the critical factors that impact the implementation of federal education legislation in child welfare agencies (CWA). Specifically, the factors critical to the implementation of the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which requires CWAs to work in collaboration with state education agencies in efforts to improve the educational outcomes of children in foster care (Bigley & Moore, 2019; Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015). The following research questions guided the study:

RQ1: What are critical factors impacting the implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) between the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (TX DFPS) and education professionals in school districts within Region 10 of the Texas Education Agency (TEA)?

RQ 2: What are the experiences of stakeholders (i.e., caseworkers, supervisors, program managers, and administrators) within the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (TX DFPS) concerning collaboration in relation to the implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)?

RQ 3: What are the experiences of stakeholders (i.e., teachers, counselors, and principals) within Region 10 Texas Education Agency (TEA) concerning collaboration in relation to the implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)?

The preceding chapter provided an overview of the data collected from TX DFPS and Region 10 TEA participants and introduced core themes from the data analysis. Many of the developed core themes aligned with the concepts of the general systems theory (GST) and Edwards' policy implementation model, the theoretical framework and conceptual model from which the study was constructed. However, some themes exposed gaps in the framework and

model relative to policy implementation within CWAs. This chapter critically analyzes the findings and their relationship to GST, Edwards' policy implementation model, and extant literature on federal policy implementation in CWAs. It examines theoretical and practical implications, acknowledges study limitations, proposes a framework for optimal federal policy implementation in CWAs, and suggests avenues for further research.

Reexamining General Systems Theory and Edwards' Policy Implementation Model

The GST, along with Edwards' policy implementation model, provided the framework for analyzing the experiences of TX DFPS employees and educational leaders within Region 10 TEA regarding the implementation of ESSA. Participants were asked to recall their experiences with the implementation of ESSA relating to key implementation drivers as identified by the Implementation Process Measure (IPM), GST, and Edwards' implementation model. The IPM tool was used in previous studies to ascertain key measures for successful systems change within CWAs (Armstrong et al., 2014; Weeks, 2021). Measures identified via the IPM tool aligned closely with the key concepts of Edwards' implementation model, suggesting that critical factors for implementation include communication, resources, attitudes, and bureaucratic structure. Likewise, data collected from participants produced themes and sub-themes fundamentally aligned to the implementation model of Edwards and the theoretical concepts of GST, highlighting the interdependence and interrelationship of elements within a system to achieve a goal (i.e., implementing federal policy). Together, the GST and policy implementation model provides a guide for analyzing participant responses and experiences and aid in developing best-practice recommendations for implementing federal policies in CWAs.

Discussion of the Findings

Theme 1: (Effective, Engaged, and Empathetic) Leadership is Key to Implementation Success

The first core theme developed around research question one addresses the role of leadership in relation to the implementation efforts of CWAs regarding ESSA. Participants expressed their thoughts on key characteristics of leaders that impact implementation and, ultimately, the staff's response to change. The sub-themes of *Leadership "Trickle-Down" Effect* and *Organizational Response to Change Driven by Leader Approach* arose as participants described experiences of leadership engagement and approach to implementation.

Leadership's "Trickle-Down" Effect was a sub-theme derived from participant responses stating that implementation directives are often cascaded from senior-level leadership with minimal knowledge of current practices and implementation implications. Participants described the cascade of information as "ironic" as leadership "does not understand how we can do things effectively" since they are not engaged and often "there is no consideration or even ask of the field staff" on current processes that could be impacted from implementation.

Sub-theme two, *Organizational Response to Change Driven by Leader Approach,* explores participants' experiences related to the influence of leadership on organizational change. Participants collectively emphasized the importance of leadership's knowledge and engagement in implementation efforts. They observed that staff can readily discern when leaders are well-informed and have invested time in understanding the subject matter. Participants agreed that leaders' actions and behaviors significantly influence the organization's overall mindset and approach to implementation endeavors. This underscores the pivotal role of

leadership in setting the tone and driving successful policy implementation within the organization.

The experiences described by the participants regarding the impact of leadership on implementation directly relate to the fundamental concepts of communication and behaviors. Edwards' policy implementation model states that victory for policy implementation is determined based on the aspects of communication, behaviors, and beliefs (Edwards, 1980; Mubarok, 2020). Edwards (1980) believed that attitudes and behaviors toward a policy predicated implementation efforts. This study substantiated this ideal as leaders' attitudes toward implementation were imitated by staff, ultimately impacting the overall organizational response to change as a result of implementation. Furthermore, a study by Akin et al. (2016) evaluated implementation efforts from the perspectives of front-line workers in child welfare settings. The study found that leadership contributed to implementation through communication and reinforcement of leader priorities (Akin et al., 2016). Leader priorities often predicated leader behavior; thus, optimistic leaders exhibited engaged behaviors that, in turn, influenced the front-line staff (Akin et al., 2016). This study aligns with the conclusions drawn by Akin et al. (2016), Cline (2000), and Long (2019) that leadership communication and attitude toward policy drives implementation efforts within the organization.

Theme 2: Availability of "The Right" Resources

The second core theme, the *Availability of "The Right" Resource*, was developed in response to the research question to understand critical implementation factors. Data collected from TX DFPS and TEA participants detailed the importance of resources to aid in the effective implementation of ESSA. Participants highlighted the pervasive issue of resource scarcity as a significant obstacle. They acknowledged that this challenge has been a long-standing concern

within the organization. However, the discussion extended beyond merely recognizing the problem, as participants provided detailed insights into how the resource deficit hindered ESSA implementation. They emphasized not only the general lack of resources but also the inadequacy of the limited available resources. Participants argued that the resources provided were insufficient to ensure successful implementation, directly impacting their ability to execute the policy effectively. The shortfall in resources was considered a critical factor limiting their capacity to implement ESSA as intended.

Hartnell et al. (2019) identified resources as a critical component of an organization's system and desired outcomes. Participants of this study referred to the term resources when speaking of the additional manpower and labor necessary to implement new initiatives effectively. When Hartnell et al.'s (2019) findings are applied to this study, it suggests that additional labor's overall competence, knowledge, and skills (or lack thereof) impacted the desired outcomes relative to ESSA implementation for CWAs (Mthethwa, 2012). Furthermore, Edwards' policy implementation model also calls out resources as a key and critical factor for implementation, while the GST recognizes the interdependence and interrelationship of parts, including system resources (Edwards, 1980; Von Bertalanffy, 1950). Edwards' policy implementation model explicitly identified staff as a resource, pointing to the importance of staffing adequacy and further supporting the view that staffing is a critical element when analyzing the effective implementation of federal policy.

Theme 3: Training, Training, and More Training…Modality and Frequency

Frequency and training modality were often mentioned as participants described factors impacting implementation and the resulting collaboration with their partners. Thus, the core theme, *Training, Training, and More Training…Modality and Frequency* was created. The

theme focused mainly on the responses from participants who expressed being in a constant state of training. This supports findings in studies from Lambert et al. (2016), Kay et al. (2012), Mthethwa (2012), and Weeks (2020), among others, where training was identified as a critical component of implementation, and Weeks (2020) identified training as the most prominent theme for quality implementation.

Similarly, Lambert et al. (2016) noted that training during the early implementation phases is a core driver for successful organizational change in CWAs. However, neither the GST nor Edwards' policy implementation model specifically identified training as a critical factor for implementation. The notion of equifinality is referred to in GST as a concept depicting the final stage being impacted by initial conditions (Friedman & Allen, 2014; Von Bertalanffy, 1950). Thus, early efforts surrounding training can have substantial impacts on outcome efforts (Lambert et al., 2016; Weeks, 2021). In alignment with the findings from Lambert et al. (2016), participants from this study acknowledged the importance of early-stage training before implementation to prepare and increase confidence regarding forthcoming implementation efforts. An acknowledgment from the GST and the policy implementation model to the relevance of training, specifically early-stage, would enhance the theoretical and conceptual model and their pertinence to CWAs implementation efforts.

Theme 4: Communication is Critical

Communication is fundamental to implementation efforts (Lambert et al., 2016; Mthethwa, 2012; Weeks, 2021). Participants from this study acknowledged that consistency and frequency in communication are essential to the receptivity of the changes necessary to implement ESSA (Lambert et al., 2016; Mthethwa, 2012; Weeks, 2021). Participants confirmed that consistent communication is vital to effective performance of their role. There is a reliance

on consistent communication to feel confident in their job. The resulting core theme,

Communication is Critical, was identified.

A study completed by Long (2019) evaluated educators' understanding of and response

to ESSA. The study recommended that educators demonstrate a sense of familiarity and

knowledge of the legislation to be implemented. Such knowledge increased optimism for and

desire to implement ESSA as directed (Long, 2019). Participants of this study from both CWAs

and educational agencies also provided feedback on the importance of understanding not only

the legislation itself but also the relevance of the legislation and key policy components. Long

(2019) found that participants' response to implementation were more engaging when

participants understood the policy and policy components and had time to comprehend the

change to be implemented. Participants of this study expressed a level of understanding related

to the policy proving to have a direct correlation to the implementation efforts (Mubarok et al.,

2020). While Edwards' policy implementation model notes that communication is key to

implementation success, the findings from this study suggest that the type of communication and

the message content is the key to successful policy implementation (Edwards, 1980; Mubarok et

al., 2020). Effective communication requires communicating the 'why' and ensuring front-line

implementers understand the policy before implementation (Long, 2019).

The importance of communication, mainly through the key concept of feedback loops,

was acknowledged through GST, calling feedback an imperative for system functions (Friedman

& Allen, 2014). While feedback is an important aspect of communication, as was found in

studies completed by Stewart and Ayers (2001) and Week (2021), the theoretical model fails to

recognize and differentiate between general communication (i.e., knowledge exchange, policy

review, instructional information) and feedback. Feedback was helpful once the change was

implemented as opposed to aiding in the implementation of the change (Weeks, 2021). On the

contrary, Edwards' policy implementation model identifies communication as a key and critical

aspect of the model, recognizing that inadequate communication can be detrimental to

implementation efforts (Edwards, 1980; Mubarok et al., 2020). Edwards' model portrays

participants involved in implementation efforts as having a complete understanding of what they

should be doing (Edwards, 1980). As this study's participants concluded, communication should

include procedural instruction and underlying rationale. The current broad conceptualization of

communication in implementation frameworks should be refined to delineate specific elements

that significantly impact the implementation process. This more thoughtful approach to

communication would enable organizations to identify and leverage critical communicative

aspects that influence implementation efficacy. A refined understanding could potentially

enhance the theoretical models of policy implementation and provide more actionable guidance

for practitioners in the field.

Theme 5: Collaboration, Accountability, and Perspective are Vital Ingredients to The Success

and Stability of Implementation

Collaboration has been recognized as an integral component of implementation (Day et

al., 2014; Gill & Oakley, 2018). Literature is available outlining the impact of collaboration on

outcome efforts for CWAs. A study from Gill and Oakley (2018) evaluated the perception of

front-line CWA workers relative to collaboration as a tool to support youth and enhance

outcomes for change initiatives such as policy implementations. Similar to the findings from this

study, caseworkers and educational representatives agreed that cross-system collaboration is

critical, but organizational difficulties related to resource allocation and variances in priorities

and processes challenge effective implementation efforts (Day et al., 2014; Gill & Oakley, 2018).

Participants relied on cross-system collaboration and accountability; thus, the resulting theme, *Collaboration, Accountability, and Perspective are Vital Ingredients to The Success and Stability of Implementation* emerged. Participants from TX DFPS and TEA shared sentiments expressing the importance of knowing they could collaborate with and hold the other organizations accountable for their role in the implementation of ESSA. The results of this study directly aligned with that of Villagrana (2020), in which a model was explored to improve educational stability for youth through collaboration between CWAs and educational agencies. The study found that joint collaborative efforts surrounding change increased the efficiency, effectiveness, and awareness necessary to achieve the established goal (Gill &Oakley, 2018; Villagrana, 2020).

Neither Edwards' implementation model nor GST identifies collaboration as a key component for policy implementation. GST references the interplay of systems or how two systems affect one another but does not focus on the role of collaboration, even though 50 years of research have highlighted that collaboration is required to ensure that the systems work together to achieve the goal (Von Bertalanffy, 1950; Gill & Oakley, 2018). Established collaborative efforts between the CWA and educational agency minimize barriers and allow for processes to be established that support implementation efforts on behalf of both systems (Gill & Oakley, 2018; Villagrana, 2020).

Theme 6: The Influence of Politics and Finances on Implementation Efforts is Unavoidable

The final core theme developed from participants' responses centers around the influence of politics and finances on implementation efforts. The theme, *Influence of Politics and Finances*

on Implementation Efforts is Unavoidable, recognizes the convergence of previous federal

educational legislations in efforts to implement ESSA fully. Participants recounted experiences

indicating that comprehension and application of ESSA legislation alone were insufficient for

effective implementation. They highlighted the need to reference multiple legal frameworks,

notably the McKinney-Vento Act and No Child Left Behind (NCLB), which inform the

interpretation and application of ESSA. This observation aligns with research by Heise (2017)

and Kennedy (2022), who investigated the factors influencing ESSA implementation. These

studies suggest that ESSA's implementation is substantially shaped by antecedent federal

legislations, which continue to exert influence beyond the initial implementation phase. This

interconnectedness of legislative frameworks underscores the complex legal landscape within

which ESSA operates and must be understood.

Additionally, the sub-theme, *Data Tracking and Reporting Driven by Funding* highlights

the relationship between data and funding, with participants noting the relationship between new

initiatives and funding. Previous research in this area has also highlighted the reliance of child

welfare initiatives and implementation on the anticipated funding to be received (Bald et al.,

2022; Haskins, 2020). States vary significantly in their composition of funding, which includes

sources at the local, state, and federal levels; however, federal funding makes up nearly half of

all child welfare funding nationwide (DeVooght & Cooper, 2012; Haskins, 2020). Haskins

(2020) was optimistic that future federal policies and associated federal funding will increase the

likelihood of positive outcomes for child welfare initiatives and policy implementations. The

anticipated positive outcomes can only be realized with proper implementation, which, based on

the results of this study and concepts of GST, is driven by funding.

Theoretical Implications

Edwards' policy implementation model does not consider previous legislation's influence on implementation. However, the model addresses resource allocation and accountability based on data gathering as required by the initiative to receive funding. Edwards' model acknowledges resources as a critical implementation factor and highlights that resources encompass a wide array of elements crucial for translating policy directives into practical action (Edwards,1980; Mubarok, 2020), such as financial allocations, human capital, time allocation, infrastructure, physical resources, data resources, and political capital which collectively enable the effective translation of policy into practice. The results of this study corroborate the critical role of resources in policy implementation, with funding emerging as a critical factor that shapes both the process and the outcome.

Distinguishing between open versus closed systems is fundamental to applying the GST. The theory suggests that systems maintain their composition amid changing components that make up the system (Von Bertalanffy, 1950). CWAs are regarded as open systems that are multifaceted and dynamic in their operational aspects (Glisson, 2007; Stewart & Ayers, 2001). Conversely, the educational system mimics a closed system, simple and primarily constant in makeup. For a policy to be effectively implemented in an open or closed system, the connection between the systems and the environment must be understood (Stewart & Ayers, 2001). Thus, identifying and acknowledging the key components of opposing systems required to work together could enhance the acceptance of new processes that impact implementation.

Practical Implications

Enhancing Policy Implementation in Child Welfare Agencies (CWA)

The ESSA legislation semi-addressed the recommendation from Day et al. (2014) to establish "school-site teams" comprised of child welfare workers, educators, community partners, and others involved in the well-being of the child (p.6). The legislation requires schools and CWAs to establish the role of education liaison and collaborate and work together to enhance outcomes for the child (Day et al., 2014; Bigley & Moore, 2019). Despite the efforts of ESSA legislation to not only encourage but require collaboration between CWAs and educational agencies, there remains a gap in the communication and instruction surrounding the implementation of the legislation (Bigley & Moore, 2019; Sharp, 2016). Furthermore, the legislation provides minimal guidance on managing and sustaining collaborations (Villagrana, 2020).

Two best practice recommendations for CWAs as they implement future federal education policies and any federal policies requiring systematic changes are identified based on the findings of this study.

1. **Highlight Leadership's Influence on Implementation**

Recognize leaders as champions who promote and support the adoption of implementation efforts. Hartnell et al. (2019) find that leadership provides direction to help optimize organizational functions and objectives. Leaders' roles vary based on the organizational structure of CWAs. Still, the influence of leaders on front-line staff and organizational culture is unrivaled and can be the catalysts necessary for successful implementation (Hartnell et al., 2019; Long, 2019; Weeks, 2020).

2. **Create Awareness of the Need for Systematic Interventions**

CWAs function as a distinct complex system with varying sub-parts working together to support youth in care (Glisson, 2007; McCrae et al., 2014; Goering, 2018). The interplay of various parts within CWAs, coupled with the requirement of ESSA to collaborate with educational agencies, requires the development of systematic interventions. Systematic interventions, defined as "purposeful action by an agent to create change," provide the foundation and guidance necessary to increase the likelihood of implementation success (Midgley & Rajagopalan, 2021, p. 14). Systematic intervention agents range from decision-makers, organizations, processes, and communities within an ecosystem to ignite change. Upon review of implementation practices in TX DFPS and findings from this study, systematic intervention agents range from decision-makers, organizations, processes, and communities that can ignite change. A diverse array of systematic interventions has been identified (Opalka & DeArmond, 2019; Texas Education Agency et al., 2022). These include:

1. New training mechanisms (e.g., meeting-in-a-box, web-based learning modules, peer-to-peer mentoring programs)

2. Implementation of standard protocols (e.g., standardized document templates, uniform assessment tools, structured communication channels)

3. Development of special committees (e.g., Foster Care Consortia, interdisciplinary policy implementation teams)

4. Data-driven decision-making systems (e.g., real-time performance dashboards, predictive analytics tools)

5. Cross-sector collaboration frameworks (e.g., formal partnerships with educational institutions, joint task forces)

6. Adaptive leadership strategies (e.g., change management workshops, leadership development programs focused on policy implementation)

7. Technology-enabled case management systems (e.g., integrated databases, mobile applications for field workers)

8. Continuous quality improvement processes (e.g., regular policy effectiveness audits, feedback loops for frontline staff)

9. Resource allocation optimization tools (e.g., budget modeling software, workload distribution algorithms)

10. Community engagement initiatives (e.g., public awareness campaigns, stakeholder feedback mechanisms)

By leveraging a comprehensive suite of interventions, CWAs can better navigate the complex landscape of policy implementation and enhance outcomes for youth in care.

Limitations of the Study

This study aimed to understand the critical factors impacting education policy implementation in CWAs from the perspective of CWA and education representatives. Although the study could add to the current body of knowledge with meaningful results drawn from participant responses, there were limitations to the study that warrant review and discussion. An initial limitation of this study was the small sample size. TX DFPS is one of the largest child welfare agencies in the United States, serving nearly 17,000 school-aged foster youth daily (Texas Education Agency et al., 2022). One can only assume that it takes a vast number of front-line workers to serve 17,000 youth daily. As such, hearing the responses of only eight participants within TX DFPS does not suggest a representative sample size. However, saturation was reached after only a minimal number of participants. Saturation was when participant

responses began to mimic their peers, thus reducing the need for further data collection (Hennink et al., 2019). Additionally, participants of this study ranged in title and position but were all from TX DFPS Region 13 and not from the often referenced 'state office,' which develops and guides implementation efforts cascaded to workers throughout the state. It would have added to the study to have included representation from the 'state office' to understand critical considerations for implementation from a senior perspective.

Another potential limitation of the study centers around the timing of the data collection. ESSA was first signed into legislation in 2015. States were required to submit plans by 2017, with implementation of ESSA requirements to occur by the start of the 2018-2019 school year, with some schools starting even earlier. It is understood that it takes time to see change when new legislation and policies are implemented in large systems such as CWAs and education systems. However, the data collection for this study took place in 2023, requiring participants to recall implementation efforts from years prior. The possibility of participants leaving out details potentially impactful to the study is a limitation to be considered.

Recommendations for Future Research

A wealth of research exists that explores implementations related to change efforts pertaining to evidence-based interventions and programmatic changes within CWAs (Akin et al., 2016; Feely et al., 2020; Glisson et al., 2006; Goering, 2018; Hodge &Welch, 2016; Sanclimenti et al., 2017; Williams & Glisson, 2020). Despite the vast amount of research intended to understand critical components, processes, and best practices surrounding the implementation of evidence-based interventions and programming within CWAs, there is minimal research focused on implementing federal education policies in CWAs (Long, 2019). Current literature assesses federal education policies and their influence on educational systems and their impacts on the

academic trajectory of foster youth, with limited study of the connection to and impact on CWAs (Cox, 2013; Hodge & Welch, 2016; McGuinn, 2016). There is an opportunity to expand knowledge pertaining to and enhance outcomes of federal education policies by understanding how varied efforts related to implementing federal educational policies impact child welfare agencies. Developing an in-depth understanding of key systematic changes that occur with each implementation may aid in framing and managing future implementation efforts to achieve implementation success.

McCrae et al (2014) called for the creation of a change model that aids in framing key strategies for CWAs to help with implementation and collaboration. Building on that notion, additional research should aspire to develop an implementation model suited for CWAs. The Implementation Process Measure (IPM) was adapted for this research study. In contrast, other studies have used varying models, such as those from the National Implementation Research Network (NIRN) and the Implementation Regime Framework (IRF), in attempts to assess implementation efforts (Cline, 2000; Akin et al., 2016). Researchers have adapted each of these models to understand implementation within CWAs. An opportunity for research development in policy implementation in CWAs would entail development a new or amendment a current implementation model specifically addressing the nuanced nature of child welfare agencies.

Measuring success for implemented federal education policies is often assessed through key performance indicators as reported via annual school-based report cards (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015; Bigley & Moore, 2019). Reporting is often heavily focused on academic indicators over a short period (i.e., academic school year), needing more attention to longitudinal outcomes for youth in care (Portz & Beauchamp, 2022; Rentner et al., 2017). An opportunity exists for future research to assess outcomes of implemented federal educational policies and

analysis in relation to the overall well-being of foster youth. Research in this area would support legislators in developing educational policies that promote immediate changes in the academic outcomes of foster youth and identify and address the social well-being of youth in care.

Conclusion

Numerous studies have set out to better understand the challenges CWAs face when implementing the systemic changes often required with the signing of new federal legislation for youth in foster care. Studies such as those completed by Kaye et al. (2012), Armstrong et al. (2014), Mthethwa (2012), and Weeks (2020) identify drivers for implementation similar to the key components of Edwards' policy implementation model and the constructs of GST.

This study examined critical factors influencing implemention of federal education legislation such as ESSA. It sought to capture the experiences of TX DFPS and Region 10 TEA representatives regarding ESSA implementation and collaboration among agencies as a required aspect of ESSA. Data collected via participant responses from semi-structured interviews of TX DFPS personnel and a focus group of representatives from Region 10 TEA yielded six core themes related to the implementation of ESSA. Core themes developed from the data focused on leadership, availability of resources, training and associated systematic interventions, communication, collaboration, accountability, and the interplay of politics and finances related to implementation efforts.

Limitations of the study are acknowledged and addressed, along with recommendations for future research. Proposed best practice strategies emphasize the influence of leadership, specifically on implementing systematic change interventions pertaining to federal legislation for CWAs. Theoretical implications of the study center around the GST and the conceptual framework of Edwards' policy implementation model. GST and Edwards' policy

implementation model were used as a framework to guide the researcher in recognizing and

understanding key aspects of implementation. The findings from this study add to the general

body of knowledge surrounding implementation efforts in CWAs.

     *The Franklin University EdD program has specific learning outcomes that students must

master upon completing the program and the associated research study. The researcher of this

study has met and addressed each of the respective program outcomes as outlined in Appendix

H.

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Appendix A: Sample Recruitment Email – Child Welfare Agency

Hello, my name is Roschanda Fletcher, and I am a graduate student in the Doctor of Education Program at Franklin University in Columbus, Ohio. I am doing a research project as part of the requirements for earning my doctoral degree.

The purpose of my project is to understand key strategies and factors that impacted implementation of federal education policy, ESSA of 2015, in Texas' Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) and Child Protective Services (CPS) divisions. I am inviting you to participate in my project to understand your personal experiences with implementation of federal policies, specifically Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), for your agency.

Participation in this study would require you to engage in an interview with myself as the Principal Investigator. Interviews are anticipated to last no longer than 45 minutes. During the interview you will be asked about your thoughts and experiences with federal policy implementation within your organization. All study participants will be given a $25 e-gift card for their time.

Please note there are no right or wrong answers. Any responses provided will be used in conjunction with other data collected in attempts to answer the research question. You will in no way be identified throughout the study.

Should you have any questions about the study and/or participation prior to determining if you'd like to participate, please contact me at fletch41@email.franklin.edu.

If you would like to move forward with participation in the study, please review and acknowledge the informed consent form at the link below:

LINK TO FORM

Thank you for your time and consideration!

Roschanda Fletcher

Roschanda Fletcher
Doctoral Candidate, EdD Program
Franklin University
(c) 469.649.2348
Fletch41@email.franklin.edu

Appendix B: Sample Recruitment Email – Education Agencies/Schools

Hello, my name is Roschanda Fletcher, and I am a graduate student in the Doctor of Education Program at Franklin University in Columbus, Ohio. I am doing a research project as part of the requirements for earning my doctoral degree.

The purpose of my project is to understand factors influencing federal education policy implementation in child welfare agencies. I am inviting you to participate in my project to understand your experiences as a stakeholder and collaborative partner of child welfare with the implemented strategies in efforts to address the federal education policy, Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

Participation in this study would require you to engage in a focus group with myself as the Principal Investigator and up to 7 other participants from various school districts. Focus groups are anticipated to last no longer than 60 minutes. During the focus group you will be asked about your perceptions of any implemented measures from child welfare in addressing the Every Student Succeeds Act, as well as any efforts for collaboration between organizations. All study participants will be rewarded with a $25 e-gift card upon completion of interviews.

Please note there are no right or wrong answers. Any responses provided will be used in conjunction with other data collected in attempts to answer the research question. You will in no way be identified throughout the study.

Should you have any questions about the study and/or participation prior to determining if you'd like to participate, please contact me at fletch41@email.franklin.edu.

If you would like to move forward with participation in the study, please review and acknowledge the informed consent form at the link below:
LINK TO FORM

Thank you for your time and consideration!

Roschanda Fletcher

Roschanda Fletcher
Doctoral Candidate, EdD Program
Franklin University
(c) 469.649.2348
Fletch41@email.franklin.edu

Appendix C: Interview Informed Consent

Hello, my name is Roschanda Fletcher, and I am a graduate student in the Doctor of Education Program at Franklin University in Columbus, Ohio. I am doing a research project as part of the requirements for earning my doctoral degree.

Why is this study being done?

The purpose of my project is to understand the organizational factors that influence implementation of federal education policies in child welfare agencies. I am inviting you to participate in my project to understand your personal experiences with implementation of federal policies, specifically the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

What am I being asked to do?

If you participate in this project, I will meet with you for an interview at a location and time convenient for you either in-person or online.

Taking part in this study is your choice.

Your participation in this project is completely voluntary. You may stop participating at any time. If you stop being in the study, there will be no penalty or loss of benefits you would normally have.

What will happen if I decide to take part in this study?

The interview will last no more than 45 minutes. The interview will include questions assessing familiarity with ESSA legislation and describing key implementation strategies to address ESSA.

Only you and I will be present during the interview. With your permission, I will audio and video record the interview so that I can focus on our conversation and later transcribe the interview for data analysis. You will be one of no more than 12 people I will interview for this study.

What are the risks and benefits of taking part in this study?

I believe there is little risk to you for participating in this research project. If any questions or topics make you feel stressed or uncomfortable, you can skip the question or take a break. You can also stop the interview or you can withdraw from the project altogether.

There will be no direct benefit to you for participating in this interview. The results of this project may help to understand how federal education policy implementation impacts the educational attainment of foster youth.

Privacy and Confidentiality:

All information collected from participants will be strictly confidential. After the collection of data, all de-identified participant information, recorded interviews, and transcribed data will be stored online in a password-protected, cloud drive (i.e., Microsoft One Drive) on a password protected computer. Only my Franklin University dissertation committee methodologist and I

will have access to the information. The Franklin University IRB has the right to review research records for this study.

After I write a copy of the interviews, I will erase or destroy the audio recordings. When I report the results of my research project, I will not use your name. I will not use any other personal identifying information that can identify you. I will use pseudonyms (fake names) and report my findings in a way that protects your privacy and confidentiality to the extent allowed by law.

Compensation:

You will receive a gift card in the amount of $25 for your time and effort in participating in this research project.

Future Research Studies:

Identifiers will be removed from your identifiable private information and after removal of identifiers, the data may be used for future research studies or distributed to another investigator for future research studies, and we will not seek further approval from you for these future studies.

Questions:

If you have any questions about this study, please email me at **fletch41@email.franklin.edu**. You may also contact my dissertation chair, Dr. Valerie Storey, at Valerie.Storey@frankin.edu. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact the Franklin University IRB Office at 614-947-6037 or irb@franklin.edu.

If you agree to participate in this project, please sign and date the following signature page and return it to: Roschanda Fletcher at fletch41@email.franklin.edu

Keep a copy of the informed consent for your records and reference.

Signature(s) for Consent:

I agree to join the research project entitled, "Exploring Federal Education Policy Implementation in Child Welfare Agencies."

Please initial next to either "Yes" or "No" to the following:

_____ Yes   _____ No   I consent to be audio recorded for the interview portion of this research.

_____ Yes   _____ No   I consent to be video recorded for the interview portion of this research.

Name of Participant (Print): _____

Participant's Signature: _____

Signature of the Person Obtaining Consent: _____

Date: _____

Appendix D: Focus Group Informed Consent

Hello, my name is Roschanda Fletcher, and I am a graduate student in the Doctor of Education Program at Franklin University in Columbus, Ohio. I am doing a research project as part of the requirements for earning my doctoral degree.

Why is this study being done?

The purpose of my project is to understand the organizational factors that influence implementation of federal education policies in child welfare agencies. I am inviting you to participate in my project to gain your perspective regarding the implementation changes put in place by your local child welfare agency as required from Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015.

What am I being asked to do?

If you participate in this project, you will join up to 7 other people in a focus group to discuss your perspective of any known implementation efforts by your local child welfare agency to meet requirements outlined by federal policy, Every Student Succeeds Act.

Taking part in this study is your choice.

Your participation in this project is completely voluntary. You may stop participating at any time. If you stop being in the study, there will be no penalty or loss of benefits you would normally have.

What will happen if I decide to take part in this study?

It will take no more than 60 minutes. Focus group will include questions assessing familiarity with ESSA legislation and describing collaborations with the local child welfare agency.

I will audio and video record the focus group so that I can later transcribe the interview and analyze the responses.

What are the risks and benefits of taking part in this study?

I believe there is little risk to you in participating in this research project. If any questions or topics make you feel stressed or uncomfortable, you can skip the question or take a break. You can also stop participating at any time.

There will be no direct benefit to you for participating in this focus group. The results of this project may help to understand how federal education policy implementation impacts the educational attainment of foster youth.

Privacy and Confidentiality:

I will keep all study data. All information collected from participants will be strictly confidential. After the collection of data, all de-identified participant information, recorded interviews, and transcribed data will be stored online in a password-protected, cloud drive (i.e., Microsoft One Drive) on a password protected computer. Only my Franklin University dissertation committee

methodologist and I will have access to the information. The Franklin University IRB has the right to review research records for this study.

After I write a copy of the interviews, I will erase or destroy the audio recordings. When I report the results of my research project, I will not use your name. I will not use any other personal identifying information that can identify you. I will use pseudonyms (not your real names) and report my findings in a way that protects your privacy and confidentiality to the extent allowed by law.

Although we ask everyone in the focus group to respect each person's privacy and confidentiality, and not to identify anyone in the group or repeat what is said during the group discussion, please remember that other participants in the group may accidentally disclose what was said. Avoid sharing personal information that you may not wish to be known.

Compensation:

You will receive a gift card in the amount of $25 for your time and effort in participating in this research project.

Questions:

If you have any questions about this study, please email me at **fletch41@email.franklin.edu**. You may also contact my dissertation chair, Dr. Valerie Storey, at Valerie.Storey@franklin.edu. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact the Franklin University IRB Office at 614-947-6037 or irb@franklin.edu.

If you agree to participate in this project, please sign and date the following signature page and return it to: Roschanda Fletcher at fletch41@email.franklin.edu

Keep a copy of the informed consent for your records and reference.

Signature(s) for Consent:

I agree to join the research project entitled, "Exploring Federal Education Policy Implementation in Child Welfare Agencies."

Name of Participant (Print): _____

Participant's Signature: _____

Signature of the Person Obtaining Consent: _____

Date: _____

Appendix E: Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your familiarity with the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 and your role relative to federal policy implementation?

2. Describe (if any) any models, structures, and/or plans used to support implementation strategies for federal education policies?

3. What are some of the changes that have been implemented as part of the federal requirements for ESSA? Any strategies above and beyond what is required? If so, what and how was it determined to develop and implement such strategies?

4. From the list of presented organizational factors (i.e., shared vision, values, and mission, leadership, staff selection, training, supervision/coaching, performance assessment, facilitative administration, systems intervention, decision support data system, stakeholder engagement, and cultural responsiveness) identify any factors and the impact they may have had on your organization's ability to move forward with required implementation efforts as outlined in ESSA legislation. What actions were taken to combat any inhibiting factors?

5. Describe any efforts to include stakeholders and partners as collaborators on strategy development and implementation? How were implemented strategies communicated to stakeholders and partners?

Please provide the following demographic details:
- Race
- Gender
- Role in organization
- Length of employment with organization
- Do you have direct reports? If so, no. of direct reports

Appendix F: Focus Group Questions

1. Describe your familiarity with the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015? Requirements for schools? Requirements for child welfare agencies?

2. Are you aware of any implemented strategies by your local child welfare agency to address requirements of ESSA? If so, what are said strategies? How did you become aware of the implementation?

3. How frequently and in what methods does communication with your local child welfare agency take place?

4. When federal education policies require collaboration between schools and child welfare, who initiates the collaboration? Is there a structured committee, group or way in which collaboration and exchange of ideas takes place?

The following demographic details will be collected from all focus group participants:
- Race
- Gender
- District or School
- Role in organization
- Length of employment with organization

Appendix G: Franklin IRB Approval Letter

Date: November 15, 2022
PI: Roschanda Fletcher
Department: i4, Doctoral Studies
Re: Initial - IRB-2022-67
Exploring Federal Education Policy Implementation in Child Welfare

The Franklin Institutional Review Board has rendered the decision below for *Exploring Federal Education Policy Implementation in Child Welfare* .
Decision: Exempt
Category: Category 2.(ii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording).
Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation.

Findings: The PI is conducting interviews and focus groups to understand and evaluate key factors that influence the implementation of Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA).

The IRB determination of exemption means:
    - You must conduct the research as proposed in the Exempt application, including obtaining and documenting (signed) informed consent if stated in your application or if required by the IRB.
    - Any modification of this research should be submitted to the IRB prior to implementation to determine if the study still meets federal exemption criteria.
    - You are responsible for notifying the IRB Office with any problems or complaints about the research.

Students, please note the following:
    - You must use only the approved consent and assent forms (as applicable).
    - Prior to graduation, you will need to complete a Closure submission for the IRB Office to close the study.

Any modifications to the approved study or study closures must be submitted for review through Cayuse IRB. All approval letters and study documents are located within the Study Details in Cayuse IRB.

You may contact the IRB Office at 614-947-6037 or irb@franklin.edu with any questions.

Sincerely,
Franklin Institutional Review Board

Appendix H: Program Learning Outcomes

Program Learning Outcomes (PLOs) & Dissertation Alignment Matrix		
Program Learning Outcomes	**Alignment-Narrative**	**Evidence**
EDUC1	Apply leadership and management theory in an organizational context.	The incorporation and application of the general systems theory and Edwards' implementation model into the study.	Chapter 2 (p. 35-44)
EDUCD2	Demonstrate ethical leadership and management in an organization.	Reviewing the study design to acknowledge and adapt as necessary to ensure ethical practices.	Chapter 3 (p. 57-58; 72-73)
EDUCD3	Evaluate data to prioritize and plan organizational change.	A themeatic analysis of the data was performed to determine core themes and develop an action plan.	Chapter 4(p. 75-103 Chapter 5 (p. 104)
EDUCD4	Respond to industry legal and regulatory requirements impacting an organization.	An evaluation of the impelemntation efforts of ESSA based on legislative requirements pertaining to educational stability and collaboration.	Chapter 2 (p. 30-33)
EDUCD5	Analyze organizations to determine leadership, learning, and performance needs.	TX DFPS was selected as the organization to study based on a review of national and state data.	Chapter 2 (p. 51, 59)
EDUCD6	Apply research skills to analyze organizational problems, develop solutions, and measure their impact.	A summary of the collected data is presented along with theoretical and practice implications and recommendations for future legislative implementations.	Chapter 5 (p. 104)