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Contextual Adaptation of Family Group Conferencing Model: Early Evidence from Guatemala

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Abstract

Guatemala has faced a disproportionate number of children placed outside their families through unethical intercountry adoptions or into large residential settings, jeopardising child and family rights. In response, an international team conducted a pilot training in Guatemala on family group conferencing (FGC) as a means of maintaining children in their homes or with their kin. The training participants were child welfare professionals from government and non-government organisations as well as academics. The training included pre-post assessment of the participants' grasp of key FGC practices and focus groups on the suitability of the model in a low-wealth country with very limited child welfare resources. In general, participants began and ended with a relatively elevated understanding of basic FGC concepts. The focus groups assisted with interpreting these assessment results. According to focus group participants, FGC is culturally compatible with the country's indigenous Mayan traditions and easily implementable with Guatemalan families. The participants recommended the routine and multi-sectoral incorporation of the model including by the judiciary and the attorney general's office tasked with the ultimate child welfare decision making. Implications include the institutionalisation of the FGC model through national policy, further training for practitioners and research on the model's efficacy in Guatemala.

Keywords: Family group conferencing, child welfare, children's rights, family decision making, Guatemala child protection, indigenous practices

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Introduction

Protecting Guatemalan children and their families from involuntary separation is a major challenge, due largely to extreme poverty (Nybo, 2009) and the lack of a comprehensive child protection system. In the absence of mechanisms to strengthen families, Guatemala has experienced disproportionate numbers of unethical intercountry adoptions and of indiscriminate placement of children into residential care settings. Given the low resources of the country, transition to a fully developed child welfare system will be achieved only in incremental steps (Bunkers and Groza, 2012). In the meantime, there is an urgent need to develop culturally compatible and easily accessible means of empowering families and their immediate support systems to prevent unnecessary separations of children from their families. One such model is family group conferencing (FGC), and this approach holds the potential of keeping Guatemalan children connected to their families and communities. This article presents the process, results and implications of a pilot training and accompanying focus groups in which Guatemalan participants from government and civil society explored the efficacy and feasibility of the FGC model in their country.

Child and family rights

Since 2000, intense international attention and criticism have been focused on the dramatic escalation of Guatemalan children being unethically placed into intercountry adoptions. Major concerns were expressed regarding coerced relinquishments involving psychological pressure or financial inducements, the integrity of the consent process and child sales (United Nations Economic Council Commission on Human Rights, 2000; Gresham *et al.*, 2004; Bunkers *et al.*, 2009; Dubinsky, 2010; Bunkers and Groza, 2012). In the worst cases, forced impregnation of birth mothers and abductions of children were used to obtain children for intercountry adoption (Rotabi, 2012), causing human rights defenders to demand a cessation of intercountry adoptions (see Casa Alianza *et al.*, 2007). As a result, Guatemala passed a new adoption law in 2007 and imposed an intercountry adoption moratorium until a stronger child protection system could be operationalised to ensure the safety and rights of children and their families (Bunkers and Groza, 2012).

Children, however, continued to be admitted into child-care institutions without a systematic determination of their best interest or prioritising family-based options. A 2008 national study found approximately 6,000 children in 133 institutional child-care facilities, 95 per cent of them owned and operated by private entities with linkages to intercountry adoption (Perez, 2008). In addition, a significant number of the children residing in institutional care had court decrees designating such placement as *permanent*,

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in direct violation of the Integration Protection Law for Children and Youth, which allowed such arrangements only as a temporary measure (Perez, 2008; Bunkers and Groza, 2012). 2008 saw a modest effort to create gate-keeping procedures to place more children in family-based care and fewer in institutions, but a changed administration created one of the largest public child-care institutions in the region—for over 900 children (CRC Committee, 2010; RELAF, 2010). As a result, the total number of children in care in 2012 was similar to the number in 2008, many of them below three years of age (UNICEF Guatemala, 2012), contrary to the evidence base and the International Alternative Care Guidelines (Zeanah *et al.*, 2003, 2005; United Nations General Assembly, 2010). This pattern raised the concern of regional and international child rights advocates, as reflected in the Concluding Observations of the CRC Committee (2010) who recommended that the government develop programmes and services that promoted reintegration into biological families and communities of origin.

Integrating children into their biological family networks and communities of origin is compatible with the vision of caring for children in the Convention of the Rights of the Child ('CRC', United Nations, 1989) ratified by Guatemala in 1990, and by the Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption ('Hague Convention', Hague Conference on International Private Law, 1993, available online at *www.hcch.net/index_en.php?act=conventions.pdfandcid=69*) ratified by Guatemala in 2002 (see Status Table online at *www.cswe.org/CentersInitiatives/Diversity/AboutDiversity/51139/54865.aspx*). Both conventions encourage domestic permanency options such as kinship and community-based care over international options, and the general consensus of the global child welfare community is that institution-based care is to be applied only as a temporary and last resort (Williamson and Greenberg, 2010). Implementing the CRC and the Hague Convention, however, presents a major challenge in Guatemala where low levels of resources and human capacity in both public and private sectors, coupled with a culture of systemic violence and impunity (Costantino, 2006; Rotabi & Gibbons, 2012; Sanford, 2008), threaten the development of comprehensive child protection mechanisms. In this difficult setting, institutionalisation of children has become the standard response rather than a last resort. Easily accessible, low-resource models of reaching vulnerable families are desperately needed.

Family group conferencing

Family group conferencing (FGC) may be a timely and contextually responsive model for engaging Guatemalan families and their communities in decision making (Rotabi *et al.*, 2012). FGC brings together the family with their kin, friends and other close supports (i.e. the 'family group') to work out and implement a plan to safeguard children and their families. The approach

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is based on traditional practices common to many cultures. First legislated in *Aotearoa* New Zealand after protests by indigenous peoples against Eurocentric practice models that undermined their familial and tribal networks (Rangihau, 1986), the model affirms children's rights, family group responsibility, cultural connections and community–government partnerships (Hassall, 1996). Importantly, the family group is determined by those at the centre of the case, often mothers and children, in line with the rights of women under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (United Nations General Assembly, 1979) and the participation rights of children under the CRC (Article 12).

The rights-based framework fashioned by international conventions and ratified by Guatemala lends policy legitimacy to the legal context of FGC. The CRC, for example, provides that children have the right to grow up in a family environment (Preamble, ¶6) and should be protected from involuntary separation from their families unless the separation is necessary to protect the child's best interest due to serious abuse or neglect (Article 9). Where applicable, extended family members are recognised as primary caregivers (Article 5). Many of these concepts are also supported under the Hague Convention (1993). More specifically, the Hague Convention's *subsidiarity principle* prioritises domestic, family-based permanency options (Article 4) before institutional or international options are utilised (Hague Permanent Bureau, 2008). The CEDAW recognises the need to support women, particularly those living in rural areas, in accessing necessary social services (Article 14)—an important policy tool in a male-centred society such as Guatemala. Where indigenous peoples are concerned, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007) provides a rights-based framework, especially focused on their need to access traditional methods of conducting their personal affairs. This is especially relevant in Guatemala, as the indigenous Mayan communities make up approximately 41 per cent of the population (Central Intelligence Agency, 2013–14).

The cultural adaptability of FGC for indigenous peoples and other populations is evident from its application around the world. Canadian studies with aboriginal groups—the Inuit in Labrador (Pennell and Burford, 2000) and the Mi'kmaw in Nova Scotia (Glode and Wien, 2007)—found that family groups welcomed the opportunity to make decisions about their young relatives and in the process affirmed their cultural heritage as a guide in preserving family connections. Multiple studies have reported that FGC widens the supports around children (Pennell and Anderson, 2005), taps into families' cultural and faith-based traditions in finding solutions that work for their families (Thomas *et al.*, 2005), upholds the rights of children to their families and their families to them (Pennell *et al.*, 2011) and increases the likelihood that children will live with their parents or kin, especially for children from marginalised groups (Pennell *et al.*, 2010; Wang *et al.*, 2012). These findings from other parts of the world, particularly with indigenous groups, suggest that FGC has great potential in Guatemala as a tool for preservation of the

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nuclear family or for maintaining the child within the extended kin system. Given that much of the available FGC studies are from high-wealth countries, however, research is needed to understand how the model would operate in low-income countries.

Accordingly, this article describes what was learned from a preliminary project in 2012 that engaged participants from government, non-government organisations (NGOs) and universities from across Guatemala in a discussion of the FGC model. The goal of the project was to offer sufficient training on FGC so that the participants would have a basis from which to assess its suitability and sustainability in Guatemala, and consider whether and how to introduce the model in their communities. The hope was that diffusion of the model would decrease the unnecessary separation of children from their families and reduce the overreliance on institutional care for children.

This preliminary project rested on three main assumptions about successful diffusion of an innovation, namely a practice 'perceived as new' (Rogers, 2003, p. 6). First, model adoption required consensus building across disparate community groups who each could be influential in supporting implementation (Fixsen *et al.*, 2005). Second, these groups would be more willing to adopt the model if they identified its 'compatibility' (Rogers, 2003, p. 240) with their values and traditions. And third, sustaining the model over the long term meant that programmes would remain faithful to core practices while adapting the model to fit their context (Pennell and Anderson, 2005).

Preliminary project

Two universities in the USA, the Secretariat for Social Welfare and UNICEF in Guatemala collaborated as the major sponsors of the project. The universities provided funding and resources for curriculum development and granted human subjects approval for data collection. Prior to the training, an overview of the FGC model was first provided to the top leadership of key government agencies involved in child protection, representatives of international and national NGOs, and administrators of university programmes. Intended to sensitise key decision makers, the overview covered general FGC concepts and procedures, the costs of implementation and research evidence from around the world.

Following the general overview, a workshop for practitioners was provided over two and a half days. The first part was two days of training with a combination of plenary sessions, small group discussions, group exercises and role plays. The second part was a half-day of focus groups for reflecting on the application of FGC in Guatemala. The project team consisted of three USA-based social work educators and two child welfare consultants with extensive local experience. The FGC manual first used in Canada (Burford *et al.*, 1995) was revised to fit the Guatemalan context and distributed to participants. The sessions were held in Spanish with simultaneous English interpretation.

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Methodology

Research questions

In order to explore the efficacy and feasibility of the FGC model in Guatemala, the study addressed two questions: (i) to what extent did the participants from different organisations understand core FGC practices and (ii) according to the participants, what are the potential benefits, challenges and pathways of applying FGC in Guatemala?

Sample

A total of forty-five individuals with a variety of organisational affiliations attended the two-and-a-half-day workshop. Of the forty-five individuals in attendance, seventeen reported affiliation with a 'government organisation', fifteen with a 'non-government organisation', five reported affiliation with 'academia', one reported 'other' and three reported being affiliated with more than one type of organisation. To maximise participant privacy, further details were not collected.

Instruments and procedures

In order to address the research questions, two methods were used. First, to assess the extent to which the participants understood core FGC practices, a pre and post survey was administered. Second, to gain the participants' perspectives on the potential benefits, challenges of using FGC in Guatemala, focus groups were conducted at the end of the workshop.

Pre- and post-training surveys

The pre-/post-survey instrument was constructed by adapting items from a model fidelity instrument of key FGC principles and practices (Pennell, 2004; Rauktis *et al.*, 2012). As shown in Table 1, the survey had twelve Likert-scale items with six points: 1 *strongly disagree*, 2 *somewhat disagree*, 3 *slightly disagree*, 4 *slightly agree*, 5 *somewhat agree* and 6 *strongly agree*. The participants were asked to identify the extent to which they agreed with seven statements concerning FGC preparation, four statements about the conference process and one statement about post-conference activity. The items were skewed towards areas that could be covered in an introduction to the model. For a more complete description of FGC activities before, during and after the conference, see Burford *et al.* (1995, 2010) and American Humane (2010). Four of the items were reversed; in other words, they were posed as poor rather than good practice. Both instruments were first created in English, translated into Spanish and then back translated into English to check for the accuracy of the translation.

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Table 1 Survey items on family group conferencing practice

Item	FGC stage	Reversed
The coordinator supports the family members in figuring out whom they want invited to their conference	Preparation	
The coordinator does NOT need to prepare the service providers to take part in the conference. The service providers already know what to do at the conference	Preparation	Reversed
The coordinator asks the service providers to come to the conference with a plan already made up for the family	Preparation	Reversed
The coordinator asks the service providers to come to the conference with information about resources that the family might include in their plan	Preparation	
The coordinator asks the family members what they need to take part safely at the conference	Preparation	
The coordinator makes travel and other arrangements so that family members can attend the conference	Preparation	
The coordinator insists that children NOT attend the conference even though the family wants the children at the conference	Preparation	Reversed
The coordinator tells the family what to put in their plan	Conference	Reversed
The coordinator respects the leadership of the family in making their plan	Conference	
The coordinator helps the family finalise a plan that identifies the action steps to be taken by whom and by what date	Conference	
The coordinator asks the service providers to review the plan to make sure that it is safe for the children and other family members and to authorise resources to carry out the plan	Conference	
The coordinator reconvenes the conference if the plan needs revising	Post-conference	

The average scores on the pre- and post-test items were calculated, and paired *t*-test analyses assessed whether the amount of change from the pre to the post test was statistically significant ($p \leq 0.05$). Analysis of variance was used to determine whether pre and post responses varied by the participants' organisational affiliation.

Focus groups

To explore the insights of the participants, the researchers developed a series of five focus group questions (see the 'Results' section) that were checked for face validity with Guatemalan colleagues. Questions 1 and 2 identified the potential benefits of FGC in Guatemala. Question 3 concerned the likely challenges to introducing the model. Questions 4 and 5 inquired about what was needed to facilitate the use of FGC in the country. These were administered at the conclusion of the workshop. Participants were divided into four groups of seven or eight individuals who had mixed organisational affiliations. Each group was facilitated by a Spanish-speaking trainer or by an English-speaking trainer with the assistance of an interpreter. Focus groups notes were written with some direct quotations included and then were translated into English for analysis.

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Results

Pre- and post-training assessment

Table 2 presents the outcomes of the pre- and post-training assessments. With one exception, the average pre responses were above 4, indicating a general understanding of core FGC practices. All the post responses were above 4. A comparison of pre- and post-test scores showed significant differences for six out of the twelve questions at the $p \leq 0.05$ level. Four of these six items (Questions 3, 7, 8 and 9) had increases in identification of core FGC practices, and two (Questions 4 and 10) showed decreases.

Analysis of variance

In order to assess possible mean differences between affiliation groups, three main groups were formed: (1) Governmental Organisation (GO; $N = 17$); (2) Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO; $N = 15$); and (3) Community-based organisation, Academia, Other, and more than one affiliation specified ($N = 9$). Analyses of variance (ANOVA) were conducted for pre-test means and post-test means. ANOVA for *pre-test* mean scores for each question yielded no significant outcomes. ANOVA for *post-test* mean scores for each question yielded only one significant outcome (Question 10, $F = 3.336$, $p = 0.047$). The Bonferroni post-hoc test indicated that the NGO group had a significantly larger mean score (1.60 units higher) for Question 10 (post) than the GO group at the $p < 0.10$ level.

Table 2 *T*-test comparisons between pre- and post-test means

	Means				
Variables	Pre	Post	Difference	*t*-value	*N*
Question 1	4.82	5.12	−0.30	−0.94	34
Question 2	4.71	4.85	−0.14	−0.37	34
Question 3	3.44	4.79	−1.35***	−3.63	34
Question 4	4.85	4.21	0.64*	2.07	34
Question 5	5.38	5.41	−0.03	−0.16	34
Question 6	4.50	4.82	−0.32	−1.00	34
Question 7	4.26	5.24	−0.98**	−3.11	34
Question 8	4.73	5.39	−0.66**	−2.72	33
Question 9	5.30	5.73	−0.43*	−2.24	33
Question 10	5.12	4.38	0.47*	2.17	34
Question 11	4.91	5.18	−0.27	−0.78	34
Question 12	5.24	5.59	−0.35	−1.50	34

*$p \leq 0.05$; **$p \leq 0.01$; ***$p \leq 0.001$. Refer to Table 1 for question labels. Question pairings for the *t*-test analyses have varying *N* sizes due to listwise deletion procedures resulting from a response missing from either the pre or the post test. Also, Questions 2, 3, 7 and 8 were reverse coded for table clarity and interpretability.

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Focus group synthesis

What do you see as strengths of family group conferencing as applied to Guatemalan culture and family life?

FGC was seen as 'a valuable approach to address the family situation in its multidimensionality. It is helpful to contextualise [the situation]'. Participants identified that many of the core skills and underlying values of FGC are compatible with the Guatemalan culture and are already practised in some form in Guatemala. For example, a participant stated that 'A lot of the tools and information we [already] use to help empower the person and provide tools to self-help'. Another participant said 'We are already doing a lot of this work without a name', and was joined by many others. They pointed out that the FGC model provided a way of articulating traditional practices in modern terms and within a comprehensive set of theories, knowledge and skills.

The *Popol Vuh* (Mayan bible) was referred to when discussing the traditional Mayan story of the elders coming together and reaching resolutions through group decision making. On this same theme, another participant stated 'We would like to implement work in communities as this FGC system brings together not only family members but leaders of the community. This method helps [both] the family and also the community create and execute a plan'. Despite this tradition, one participant identified that 'typically, Guatemalan families [currently] don't have a centralised coming together way of speaking, rather they do it individually and this [FGC] is a tool to help bring them all together'. Another participant recognised that FGC could 'facilitate communication within the family and helps bring up certain issues such as alcohol, violence, and poverty . . . that exist in families but are not always talked about'.

Overall, please tell us what aspects of the family group conferencing training will be helpful for your practice in child protection and community work

Facilitating communication to promote the family's self-determination was a clear theme as participants talked about the method as being inclusive of family and resolving problems within the family system. This theme of self-determination was underscored when a participant stated the training 'reminded me of things like empathy and respect; to let people make their own decisions, for example, in our foster programme . . . the importance of keeping the child in the family'.

Participants strongly endorsed the use of the FGC before and after admitting a child to a residential care institution. One social worker stated:

> I can define two areas where I can use this method: (1) before the child is in the institution and (2) in the case of reintegration of the child to guarantee the stability of the child in the family . . . so that the child does not return to the institution.

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Another participant echoed this thought by stating 'We need to avoid the impact of institutionalisation through expanding family-based options ... FGC could help'.

The rights-based approach of FGC was seen as a core strength by a number of participants, including one who stated 'I liked the values at the foundation of this ... rights are the spirit of this, providing space for the family and empowering the family!'. Child rights were further underscored as multiple participants identified that including children in the process is a significant strength of FGC. One participant said 'Children know so much and it is very important to have them participate in the decision making process ... [FGC methods] are tools that help ensure the right of the child to participate'. Another participant said:

> In the culture of Guatemala, it would be important to educate the family about the role that the child and adolescents have. For cultural reasons they are not given this role and for lack of education, they're treated as adults.

One saw that the FGC model as particularly useful for:

> ... children who are already in institutions, as [with the FGC model] children have a greater role in [identifying] who are the people most important ... both family members and the greater community such as teachers or others in the social environment.

The important role of teachers as a source of information and support for the child was clearly demonstrated in the participants' role play during the training, as well as the importance of collaboration between faith, health and school systems.

What are the challenges to using family group conferencing within the context of Guatemalan culture and family life?

FGC was further considered within the unique context of Guatemala. One concern was the gendered reality of *machismo*, or male domination over women. This is a challenge 'especially in indigenous cultures, [because] women do not talk in front of men'. A participant to queried 'What about the possibility of hosting an all-woman FGC to ensure that we hear their voices ... and then a co-gender meeting?'. Some participants questioned whether the FGC method could be used with issues involving extreme violence such as rape and sexual abuse while other participants felt that, with the right arrangement of family members and facilitator, such delicate topics could in fact be addressed. Some pointed to the challenges brought about by the out-migration of adult family members who cannot be located, or the lack of technology to bring far-flung family members together. Some cautioned about the role of government officials or religious leaders because they can be viewed as authority figures whose involvement can unduly influence the family's decision-making process.

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What additional training do you wish for?

Coupled with the high level of enthusiasm about FGC, the most consistent feedback was the need for more training beyond an introduction. For example, the majority of participants wanted more concrete processes delineated, such as the role of the coordinator if and when he or she disagreed with the family's plan. Participants also desired in-depth technical training with more difficult cases such as with families in which domestic violence, severe substance abuse or child sexual abuse were the primary issues. Many wished to 'know the limits of each part of the structure of the meeting and how to apply it to each region within Guatemala [with] different population characteristics, and given the multiple cultures across the country'. Others wondered what is essential and what is not in the FGC method. One focus group specifically laid out a hoped-for FGC project that would include evaluation of its process and outcomes. 'We need to begin with a pilot project for evaluation ... and identify organisations that can work in municipalities, churches, or leaders of social groups—start with a few pilot groups and get the data and then move forward'.

What are the next steps needed to support you in practising family group conferencing in the communities that you serve?

A strong consensus was that the FGC method should receive macro-level institutional approval. One of the suggested approaches to institutionalising the model was to include FGC training in social work and psychology curricula of the universities and in training programmes of the various government and non-government institutions. Further, there was a clear call for multidisciplinary and multi-sectoral collaboration. One participant stated 'We all need to be on one page about focusing on the child's best interest [when facilitating the FGC], and we need to build a political consensus so that we are acting in harmony, not against each other'. Many participants suggested selective application of FGC in schools, NGO child protection agencies, early childhood education settings, parenting skills courses for family strengthening, pairing FGC with community-based family support mechanisms and incorporating the model into the training of religious leaders.

There was also strong consensus that judges and the Solicitor General's Office (PGN) should be educated about the FGC method in their child placement decisions. All four groups noted that placing children into institutions was the default mechanism relied upon by these key decision makers, but they must be trained in alternative methods such as FGC. The participants conceded that FGC as a preventative measure would be difficult to apply to Guatemala because the 'judges need immediate solutions ... and [FGC] preparation takes some time, but our judicial system currently does not allow it'. Another participant noted that, while most judges 'automatically' send children to institutions, some other judges are looking for alternatives.

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A clear consensus was that FGC should be built into placement decisions with a standardised methodology to ensure that judges can order the FGC as an alternative placement strategy.

Discussion

The pre and post tests demonstrate that the participants began and ended the training with an overall grasp of basic concepts involved in the FGC model, and this was the case whatever their organisational affiliation. These results are not surprising given that child circulation has been practised for millennia (Leinaweaver, 2007) and extended families are a natural extension of the nuclear family as reported by the participants. In this manner, the Guatemalan participants have a more ready grasp than many Anglo practitioners who think in terms of individual family members rather than being family-minded (Morris, 2012). The pre and post tests also illuminate the areas on which training will need to focus, namely those items where the significant differences were found going away from FGC principles; notably these were items where participants were struggling to find a balance between family group autonomy and professional support of the planning process.

The focus group information suggests the applicability of FGC as a child welfare mechanism in Guatemala with minimal investment. Many participants were already familiar with the basic concepts and had in fact used aspects of the FGC without knowing its name or structure. Some believed that the tradition of families coming together to solve problems would encourage the adoption of the FGC model and others believed that, with support, it is possible to appropriately tap into this resource. Even in the absence of a holistic formal child welfare system, participants believed that the FGC could leverage existing resources to impact a large number of children and families with a relatively small financial investment. Nevertheless, there are challenges in institutionalising the practice and achieving multisectoral agreement to implement it. The participants particularly appreciated the rights-based approach, demonstrating that they had been able to balance the traditional Guatemalan concepts of family authority with the rights of individual members as expressed in the CRC, CEDAW and other international conventions. The views of the focus group participants are supported by current FGC developments in Guatemala.

In the year since the training and focus groups discussion occurred, FGC has been utilised by several of the participants in both the governmental and non-governmental arenas. One participant, a professor of social work in a private university, reported that she has included FGC within her curriculum. Her students, working within the adolescent and family court in Guatemala City, have utilised FGC with children and families. Another private university social work programme has developed a course, entitled 'Family commitment in the maintenance and dignity of children as holders

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of rights', which applies FGC methodology to prevent child abandonment. Within the non-academic realm, a participant incorporated FGC methodology into a NGO's work with children in residential care. The social workers bring the family group together to develop a plan aimed at reunifying the child or placing him or her in an alternative family environment. Plans are underway to conduct an intensive training of trainers in late 2013 to further diffuse the practice model in child protection work.

Limitations and implications

These findings must be viewed in the context of a number of limitations. The sample was both an under-representation and an over-representation of the potential sample of Guatemalan practitioners who may train to facilitate the FGC in the future. The sample size was small, and yet most participants were among the highest-educated and experienced practitioners, administrators or educators in Guatemala. This means that they are well positioned to champion FGC and promote its dissemination. Translation of the research questions and the transcripts of the focus groups may not have been accurate. Furthermore, there was no control group for comparison purposes. In addition, participants may have acted on the desire to be seen in a positive light, especially since they were new to research and may not have fully believed the reassurances of confidentiality. They may have been motivated to report positive gains after receiving strong endorsement of the training from prominent leaders, although the impact of such endorsement was likely minimised by the discussion of the privacy rules and the importance of objective and accurate input. The focus group data may have been heavily influenced by the interpersonal relationships of the participants. For example, if a higher-ranking manager or supervisor was present, a front line worker may not have felt free to express his or her honest thoughts. Or, if it was known to other members of a group that a participant had a personal experience related to some of the sensitive child welfare topics, the group may have been reticent to be direct with each other. To address these limitations and concerns, future research could include a replication study of the training with a regional sample, perhaps a comparison study of urban and rural areas. Likewise, a comparison study of government and NGO sectors, including religious leaders, may also yield helpful training ideas. Feedback mechanisms could include individual interviews by an outside researcher as well as individualised forms of collecting feedback such as a written set of feedback at the end.

Conclusion

This study suggests that the FGC model may be compatible with the cultural and social context of Guatemala. There seems to be strong government

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support at least from the Secretariat for Social Welfare, whose leaders demonstrated genuine interest in adopting the FGC, evidenced by their sponsorship of the training only six months after they came into office. Although the Secretariat has the mandate to prevent family disintegration, strengthen families and protect children and adolescents, the power to make alternative care and placement decisions lies with the courts. Even if the Secretariat had such power, it currently lacks trained personnel and has few resources to launch system-wide training. It is suggested that the Secretariat for Social Welfare seek assistance to develop a plan, including identification of resources, to take the lead in developing a training plan for FGC that also includes training and certifying professionals from other government entities such as the courts and the Solicitor General's Office.

International development partners are encouraged to support such efforts based on a plan coordinated by government, the NGO sector and academia. Working with community leadership is also important, as there is a tendency to trust experts rather than marginalised families to make decisions that can serve the best interests of children. Issues of trained facilitators, resources at the community level and gender- and class-based power issues will also need to be addressed.

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