



Pre-adoption training: Experiences and recommendations from adoptive parents and course trainers

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ABSTRACT

Adoptive parents experience a great number of challenges throughout the adoption process. Hence, there is a need for thorough preparation of prospective adoptive parents prior to them receiving a child into their family. This study aimed to evaluate a Norwegian pre-adoption course from the view of both adoptive parents and trainers. Participants were 10 adoptive parents and six trainers. Focus groups and semi-structured SWOT interviews were used for the parents and trainers, respectively. Thematic analysis was used as a framework for analyzing the interview data. The course was described in terms of various strengths and weaknesses, concerning the course framework, content, administrative support and informants' personal experiences. Multiple suggestions for improving the course were suggested, such as updating the course material, providing trainers with regular updates and ensuring a nuanced presentation of the material. Participants also reported a need for post-adoptive services and had various suggestions for what this kind of service should be like, whether it be a continuation of the pre-adoption course, a maternity or support group, or a resource center for adoptive families. These findings are in line with previous research, showing that adoptive families need specialized support that is suited to their unique situation.

1. Introduction

The number of children adopted internationally has decreased dramatically over the past decade (Statistics Norway, 2018; U.S. Department of State, 2018). In the mid-2000s, countries that placed children for foreign adoption, tightened up the regulations and requirements for adoption in accordance to the Hague Convention (due to illegal, profit-driven adoption and political pressures from receiving countries; Christopher, 2016). Consequently, waiting times have increased and adoptive children tend to be older and have more special needs (e.g., physical and mental illnesses; Baden, Gibbons, Wilson, & McGinnis, 2013; McKay & Ross, 2010; Tirella, Tickle-Degnen, Miller, & Bedell, 2012). This adds to the already existing demands of becoming and being an adoptive parent.

One of the challenges for prospective adoptive parents includes going through a long period of undeliberate childlessness and infertility treatment attempts (Hogström et al., 2012). This may, in turn, influence the parents when they are going to raise the adoptive child (i.e., feelings of grief and loss that impact on their parenting). Many adoptive parents also report that they do not feel prepared for the challenges of adoption, especially when it comes to children's emotional and psychological

problems (Paulsen & Merighi, 2009). Therefore, adequate preparations could have positive effects on both parents and children, and help parents establish realistic expectations to adoption and learn to use the resources both within and outside their own family (Brodzinsky, 2008; Wind, Brooks, & Barth, 2005). Thus, the need for high-quality pre-adoption courses that prepare prospective parents for adoption, must be a priority in receiving countries, and has led some foreign countries to require documentation that adoptive parents have participated in such a pre-adoption course.

Families who seek to adopt, should receive support that helps them understand the experiences of the adoptive child (Gerstenzang & Freundlich, 2006), while the adoptive child should receive new parents that act in the best interest of the child (Eriksson, 2017; Norwegian Official Report, 2014). To this end, in many countries, such as Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands, and Australia, authorities offer pre-adoption courses to prospective adoptive parents. Evaluations of such pre-adoption courses show that parents are generally satisfied with these courses (Department of Family Affairs, 2011; Gunset & Krogstad, 2009), although there is room for improvement. As an example, the evaluation of the Danish pre-adoption course found that parents wanted more focus on child-parent attachment (Department of Family Affairs,

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2011). However, the way in which prospective parents are being prepared for the adoption of an unknown child, varies largely both within and between countries (see [Rushton & Monck, 2009](#) for an overview), and we do not know if such courses are useful for parents to help their children onto healthy developmental pathways. A recent systematic review found no randomized trials on the effects of pre-adoption courses ([Drozd, Bergsund, Hammerstrøm, Hansen, & Jacobsen, 2017](#)), underscoring the need for more empirical knowledge.

According to the few studies on pre-adoption courses, families underline the importance of support from adults with personal experience from the adoption process ([McKay & Ross, 2010](#)). Adoptive parents perceive that courses may help them understand their child, but not necessarily help them develop the parental skills they need for handling the child's problems ([Rushton & Monck, 2009](#)). Adoptive parents who have received pre-adoption preparation mention general information, information about children with special needs, interactions with others touched by adoption, access to specialized services, and parenting tools, as helpful. In contrast, dissatisfied parents emphasize the need for more preparation and quality issues such as inadequate curriculum and a negative emphasis, and lack of support services ([Lee, Kobulsky, Brodzinsky, & Barth, 2018](#)). Furthermore, prospective adopting parents in the pre-adoption process have highlighted the importance of receiving help and support from social workers in a mentoring role, rather than as assessors or controllers ([Denby, Alford, & Ayala, 2011](#)). Such a finding emphasizes the importance of the concept of power during the adoption process as described by [Eriksson \(2017\)](#). Even though most adoptive parents were satisfied with the pre-adoption training, the perceived power inequality experienced by adoptive parents made them present themselves in a positive light to be taken into consideration for adoption. Current research shows the complexity of preparing parents for adoption and that more research is needed to gain more knowledge about pre-adoption courses and their usefulness in meeting the needs of prospective parents ([Brodzinsky, 2008](#)).

Therefore, the aim of the present study was to evaluate the pre-adoption training in Norway both from the perspective of adoptive parents and trainers. More specifically, the purpose was to identify the different strengths and weaknesses with the pre-adoption course and generate knowledge to devise recommendations for future improvements to support prospective adoptive parents. This study contributes to the existing literature on the evaluation of pre-adoption courses, and on obtaining multiple perspectives by including the views of both adoptive parents and course trainers.

2. Methods

This study was a collaborative effort between the Regional Center for Child and Adolescent Mental Health, Eastern and Southern Norway (RBUP) and the Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs (hereafter referred to as 'the Directorate'), with contributions from several adoption agencies. Before adoption, all prospective adoptive parents must be referred to the Directorate from an approved adoption agency and participate in a pre-adoption course, which is mandatory to become approved for international adoption. The Directorate has been responsible for conducting pre-adoption courses since 2006. Because the course has remained largely unchanged since then, the Directorate called for bids for a course evaluation to assess the need for changes.

We carried out focus group interviews with course participants (i.e., adoptive parents). Focus groups can facilitate openness and disclosure by, for instance, having one group member "breaking the ice" on a sensitive topic or mutual support within the group, which may allow for more critical comments to be generated ([Kitzinger, 1995](#)). Individuals who share an experience tend to be more willing to disclose information when they are placed together, than when they are seated alone with a researcher ([Wilkinson, 2015](#)). Furthermore, focus groups may aid recall as participants remind each other of the course content, as well help

generate ideas of shared importance that can be used to improve the course. Challenges can arise if there are large differences between group participants ([Kitzinger, 1995](#)). However, the participants in the current study were quite homogenous.

Trainers were interviewed using an individual, semi-structured Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) interview format. Individual interviews with trainers allowed them to share their experiences while reflecting on their role and providing rich, in-depth information from their perspective, across several courses. The study was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (www.nsd.no; project nr.: 47130).

2.1. Participants and recruitment

A convenience sample of adoptive parents who met the inclusion criteria, were recruited to participate in the study. Parents were considered eligible for inclusion if they had attended the pre-adoption course after its initiation in 2006 and had gone through the international adoption process. Parents were considered ineligible if they were employed by the Directorate or one of the adoption agencies. Recruitment occurred in April 2016 through the main adoption agencies in Norway: Adopsjonsforum (www.adopsjonsforum.no), Children of the World (www.verdensbarn.no), and InorAdopt (www.inoradopt.no). Invitations to participate were posted by the agencies on their websites and Facebook pages. Twenty-one adoptive parents responded and requested more information. After receiving the information, 10 (47.6%) parents agreed to take part in the focus groups. The main reasons for declining study participation, among adoptive parents, was geographic distance and that parents could not fit the interview with their schedule, although we attempted to accommodate the time of the focus groups according to parents' schedule. Several parents also reported they had young adoptive children and either could not leave their child under the care of others or did not manage to receive childcare in time for the interview. Participants were allocated into two focus groups; six and four adoptive parents in each of the two groups, respectively.

For the recruitment of trainers, we utilized a complete sampling strategy by inviting all current trainers to participate in the study. At the time of recruitment in February 2016, there were seven trainers in Norway in total, all of whom were part-time employed by the Directorate. Six trainers consented to be interviewed, while one trainer did not respond to the invitation. All included adoptive parents and trainers provided written informed consent. The purpose and procedures of the study were fully explained to informants, both during recruitment and before the interview, and everyone had the right to withdraw from the study at any time.

2.2. The pre-adoption course

The purpose of the pre-adoption course is to prepare parents to take care of the adoptive child ([Ministry of Children and Equality, 2015](#)) and is required for all parents who wish to adopt internationally. The course takes place over two weekends with one month in between. Approximately 24 prospective adoptive parents participate on each course across the country (the course is the same across all of Norway). All participants stay at the same hotel for the weekend and each course is led by two trainers; one male and one female. Trainers most often work in couples, where one of the trainers is required to have adoption experience while the other trainer is required to have a professional background in health and social sciences (e.g., social worker, teacher or public health nurse). The course content is process-oriented and consists of lectures, group discussions, parental exercises, and films (see [Table 1](#)). The first weekend deals mostly with the time before the decision to adopt such as parental motivation for adoption, the parents and child's personal attachment history, and the child's background and history. The second weekend is mostly concerned with future-oriented

Table 1
Overview of the pre-adoption course program.

Day	Content	Description
1	Welcome and reception Theme 1: On the way to adoption Theme 2: The child's biological background Movie: "The Child's World"	Create understanding for the course contents, build security in the group Increase insight into parents' own attitudes and motivation to adopt a child Raise awareness about issues related to the child's biological origin and how this can affect life as an adoptive family
2	Summary of Day 1 Theme 3: Adoption and identity Theme 4: The child's early life Theme 5: Attachment	Parents are divided in 2 groups by gender, so that parents can talk about topics related to the adoption that are difficult to talk about with one's partner (e.g., marriage) Awareness about the starting point for adoption; the child's basic needs have not been met in life Introduce the concept of attachment; emphasize that parent-child interaction is the basis for a secure attachment; have parents reflect on their own attachments and upbringing, and how their experiences may influence their relationship to their adoptive child
3	Reflections Theme 6: Meeting the child Theme 7 + 8: Life as adoptive family (Pt. 1)	Create a focus on adoption; discuss reflections since the first course weekend Reflect on what the first time with the child may involve, both joys, challenges, and difficulties Create awareness that adoption will forever change the family; the family may face issues that are distinctive for adoptive families (especially issues related to intercountry adoption: cultural awareness, personal attitudes towards minorities etc.)
4	Summary of Day 3 Theme 7 + 8: Life as adoptive family (Pt. 2) Theme 9: Waiting time Theme 10: The road ahead	Reflect on and prepare for challenges adoptive families may meet, as well as raising awareness about differences of being an adoptive family Reflections on the adoption process; prepare for waiting times Reconcile motivation and capacity for adoption after course completion

topics such as waiting time for adoption, meeting and bringing the child home, and life as an adoptive family.

2.3. Data collection

Demographic information such as gender, age, marital status, occupational status, education, and experience with adoption, was collected at the time of the interviews, from both adoptive parents and trainers. The focus groups were carried out in May 2016 and were moderated by the first author, a research psychologist (HBB), and a female pedagogue (KL), both of whom are employed by RBUP. The two group interviews were conducted in the Western (i.e., Bergen) and Eastern (i.e., Oslo) region of Norway to increase heterogeneity among adoptive parents. The moderators explained the purpose of the focus group, encouraged an open discussion, and presented an overview of the course contents as a prompt, on an A4-sheet of paper to remind participants about its' contents (see Table 1 above). They did not know any of the parents prior to the focus group, which lasted about 1½–2 h. A semi-structured interview guide was used to ensure that identical questions were asked in both focus groups about (1) the course, (2) its' purpose, (3) relevance, (4) need for improvements, and (5) continued follow-up. See Appendix A for the full interview guide.

Trainers were interviewed individually using the open-ended SWOT-format to identify the various strengths, weaknesses, and recommendations for change to the pre-adoption course (Helms & Nixon, 2010). The open-ended format encourages participants' free reflections to each of the four, basic SWOT-questions during the first part of the interview, with minimal interruptions from the interviewer: "Please tell me about what you perceive as the [strengths/weaknesses/opportunities/threats] of the preparatory adoption course". During this first part of the interview, the interviewer only encouraged participants to provide more details and to evaluate the consistency of their answers such as "Are there any other SWOTs?", "Can you please give an example of [...]", "What is meant by [...]?", and "Why is [...] a SWOT?". This provides a certain structure to participants' reflections, but does not specify any particular type of answers or imposes a researchers' pre-conceptions about the topic under study (Lone et al., 2014). In the second, exploratory part of the interview, the interviewer systematically worked his way through each of the main SWOTs, as identified by the trainers, to elaborate on and clarify the different SWOTs. The SWOT interviews were conducted by the first author during March 2016. The author had attended an adoption course prior to conducting the interviews. Thus,

he had met two of the trainers that were interviewed later. Four of the interviews were conducted via telephone and two in-person.

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. To ensure confidentiality, all identifying information was removed from the transcriptions. Data were stored on encrypted flash drives and in a locked filing cabinet.

2.4. Data analysis

Descriptives and frequencies were run to describe the sample characteristics using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), while Excel 2016 in Microsoft Office 365 was used to analyze all qualitative data. The analysis of focus group and SWOT interview data were guided by the principles of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Ryan & Bernard, 2003). At first, three of the authors did a naïve reading of all transcripts to gain familiarity with the data. Initial codes, categories, and themes were then generated by these authors, and discussed in the research team. All data were subsequently analyzed as a first-cycle analysis, to derive codes, categories, and themes in line with the inductive, data-driven approach described by Braun and Clarke (2006), without fitting with any pre-existing coding frameworks.

A second-cycle of analysis was then performed on the focus group and interview data to analyze data according to the SWOT-dimensions for identifying strengths, weaknesses, and recommendations for changes to the pre-adoption course. Hence, a deductive analytical approach was utilized during the second-cycle, in the sense that codes, categories and themes, that were generated inductively during the first cycle, were fitted to the appropriate theoretical domains (i.e. SWOT-dimensions). All data units that did not fit any of the theoretical dimensions were coded as residuals (e.g., neutral statements or personal accounts of parents' adoption process) and later re-coded to identify any remaining themes that may inform future development of the pre-adoption course. Transcripts were not returned to participants, but an expert group on adoption that included adoptees, adoptive parents, and researchers, were presented with preliminary findings and provided written feedback on the findings that were integrated in the final analysis presented herein. The first- and second-cycle analyses were performed by the first author and critically appraised by the second and last authors during this process, to enhance the validity of the findings.

2.5. Participants

In total, 10 adoptive parents, of which five were men and five were women, participated in the focus groups, all of whom completed their questionnaires. Their average age was 41.7 (*SD* = 4.3). Their educational level varied from high-school (three parents, 30%), two to three years of higher education (three parents, 30%) to four or more years of higher education (four parents, 40%). All were married and had one or more adopted children. The average length of time between completion of the pre-adoption course and taking part in the focus groups was five years (parents completed the course between 2009 and 2014). All parents had adopted internationally.

Six trainers (three men and three women) participated in the SWOT interviews, of which five completed the questionnaire. Their average age was 53.8 years (*SD* = 5.6). Four trainers (80%) had four or more years of higher education, whereas one had three years or less, and three (60%) were parents of adoptive children, as well as one being a foster parent. All started as trainers in 2006 and had held, on average, 26.6 (*SD* = 7.9) courses.

3. Results

Data analysis resulted in multiple themes across all four theoretical domains. Some themes were specific to one group of informants (e.g., “Administrative support” was only reported by trainers), though most themes were reported by both adoptive parents and trainers (e.g., “Course content”; see Table 2 for an overview).

3.1. Theme 1: Course framework

Both groups of informants (trainers and participants) were concerned about the course framework, referring to the general pre-defined composition and structure of the course; involving features such as trainers, course requirements, and the course location. Both groups agreed that one of the most useful parts of the course was the social aspect, which facilitated how prospective adopters got to meet other adoptive families and trainers in informal settings. One parent noted:

It's useful to come and talk to other adopters [...] And being able to talk to someone who understands. Because not everyone does, necessarily, of those around you.

The trainers were often described as a positive feature of the course. Having a trainer with adoption experience made the way they conveyed the material more convincing, whereas having one with a professional background helped provide a theoretical perspective. One participant described his trainers this way:

They always knew what was coming and what to say. This was clearly something they had done before. They seemed very professional at conducting the course.

Speaking in public, role play and discussing unpleasant personal topics are all important parts of the course manual. Participants explained that the trainers helped them feel comfortable and safe, making these challenging situations less stressful.

Informants mentioned several weaknesses regarding the framework; most common, the composition of participants. For instance, the group size (i.e., about 24 participants per course) made it difficult for trainers to manage group processes properly. Participants and trainers agreed that the number of participants should be reduced to about 18–20 per course. Some also described the trainers' adoption experience as outdated, in the sense that several years had passed since they had gone through the adoption process. As for potential threats, some were concerned about the long waiting period between the course and the actual adoption of the child, and how adopters may forget much of what they learn during pre-adoption training.

3.2. Theme 2: Course content

Course content concerns the course's subject matter such as identity, attachment, and life as an adoptive family (see Table 1 above). Participants appreciated learning about “the child's backpack” (i.e., the child's experiences preceding adoption and how it might impact life in an adoptive family), taking the child's perspective, and to hear about “sunshine stories” (i.e., positive examples that helped them feel more optimistic about facing potential challenges). Some also underlined the need to “burst the pink bubble” among participants who had an overly simplistic and positive expectation of adoption. Trainers also preferred topics like the “child's backpack” and “life as an adoptive family”, and the ways in which an adoptee may feel like he or she is different from everyone else (i.e., issues related to intercultural adoption):

The thing about the child's backpack is [...] the older the children become, the larger the backpack. And it's hard to carry it alone. It's important to make people aware of this.

Despite its' advantages, course participants had several issues with the course content; some topics were either (1) missing, (2) irrelevant or (3) overly problematic. The lack “fresh content” was repeatedly reported as missing; meaning that there was a need for recent updates on adoption issues, especially from relevant stakeholders such as adoptive parents and representatives from the adoption organizations. As for irrelevant subjects, some participants disliked being asked to discuss whether they wanted to adopt:

Table 2
Results from the thematic analysis.

		Adoptive parents	Trainers
Main themes			
Theoretical domains	Strengths	Course framework Course content Personal experience	Course framework Course content Personal experience
	Weaknesses	Course framework Course content	Course framework Course content Administrative support
	Opportunities	Personal experience Course framework Course content Post-Adoptive Services (PAS)	Course framework Course content Post-Adoptive Services (PAS) Administrative support
	Threats	Course framework Post-Adoptive Services (PAS)	Administrative support

Note: Themes that occur across informant groups have been juxtaposed horizontally. An empty space means that the theme was not emphasized by that group.

The whole course is concerned with “do you really want to be mom?”. I remember I just had to go out for a while [...] just to ask myself again, do I really want to be a mom? He can be bullied. He can be [...] I'm going to become a mother. I'm going to adopt. I've decided. That's why I'm on this course and therefore I don't need them to ... rip up in these things.

The course was also described as overly problematic in the sense that the challenges of adoption were overemphasized. Participants reacted to having to listen to stories about children with attachment issues and watching videos from impoverished orphanages, especially when they were given insufficient information on how to deal with these issues.

Trainers were less concerned with the topics mentioned by participants, though they did seem to agree there was a lack of fresh content. The topics outlined by their course schedule had not undergone significant revisions since the course started in 2006. Hence, they suggested updating the course material to better reflect the current adoption situation for adoptive families. One trainer described how the material was starting to feel outdated:

[The course program] is from 2006. Although we have adapted it slightly along the way, and made it a bit more personal [...], I think it might be the biggest weakness. It's starting to become a bit worn, in a way.

Participants also had suggestions for updating the material. For instance, having parents who had adopted recently come and talk about their experiences. They would also like the course content to become more nuanced to make up for the problematization of adoption. Another suggestion involved providing more practical information, both in terms of the pre-adoption period (e.g., the demands of the different sending countries) and the post-adoption period (e.g., where to get help if they experienced problems with their children).

3.3. Theme 3: Post-adoption services

Parents and trainers were concerned about the services offered to adoptive families' after adoption and some suggested that the pre-adoption course would become more meaningful if there was a subsequent post-adoption follow-up. The most popular suggestion among trainers was to add a “part two” of the course shortly after the child's arrival to the family. Participants proposed that post-adoption services (PAS) could be offered in the form of “maternity groups” in which adoptive parents, who had adopted at the same time, could be grouped together to form a social support network:

Put people who are in the same situation together for two evenings or a weekend or something. Then just like that (snaps fingers) you've created a self-help group for 10 years to come.

Others suggested setting up a “resource center” where parents could receive professional support and information when needed. However, some also pointed out certain risks related to offering PAS. For instance, the fact that people adopt at different points in time, from different countries, and live far apart across the country, means that it would be difficult to establish and maintain such “maternity groups”.

3.4. Theme 4: Personal experience

Informants reported various ways in which the course had made an impact on them personally. One of the major strengths outlined by both trainers and participants was how they benefited personally from taking part in the course. They described, for instance, how prospective adoptive parents had gained new knowledge about attachment and child development, and how this knowledge proved useful for their children:

I think our children have benefited from the fact that, in a way, we have reflected on all the problems that can happen. So, I'm not that stressed

when they say things like: ‘I'm going home to Colombia’ or things like that. [...] for the children, the advantage is that I've become calmer. I don't stress that much about those things.

Trainers referred to how participants learned more about themselves by reflecting on their own attachment history, as well as contemplating their attitudes and motivation for adopting a child. They also stressed that they experienced running the course as rewarding, fun, and fulfilling:

For me, it's amazing to share my experience with these participants. And to see that it's appreciated and that it helps quite a few people in the process they are in. (...) To think that I help them prepare for parenthood and the child that's coming, that means a lot.

However, not all personal experiences were positive. One parent reported feeling uncomfortable after attending the course. Others were scared by some of the negative material that was presented such as the potential challenges they may face as adoptive parents or the terrible living conditions that some children had experienced before being adopted.

3.5. Theme 5: Administrative support

Administrative support concerned the way trainers experienced support (or lack thereof) from their employer. In their opinion, a major weakness was that the administration failed to provide trainers with updated information, assistance, and feedback. Moreover, despite having worked as trainers for 10 years, their salaries had not changed. This lack of incentive led some trainers to start losing their motivation:

Our wages have not been adjusted. They should have been increased. ... I spend six to eight weekends a year doing this work, which is strenuous. I have my children to take care of, so I get exhausted. ... I keep thinking: how long can I keep doing this? For this wage?

Opportunities for improvements concerned ways in which these weaknesses could be amended. For instance, trainers could receive regular feedback on their work, be offered lectures to update their knowledge on relevant adoption and psychological topics (e.g., the current adoption situation, attachment research, etc.) and have their salaries raised. During the period the course has existed, several trainers had quit without being replaced. Some trainers viewed this as a risk that their workload would increase and they would be given less time to prepare with their partner.

4. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the Norwegian pre-adoption training course from the perspective of adoptive parents and trainers. Focus groups and semi-structured interviews were used to identify strengths and weaknesses with the course, as well as potential improvements to support future adoptive parents. Five main themes were identified: 1) course framework, 2) course content, 3) post-adoptive services, 4) personal experience, and 5) administrative support. All themes were emphasized by both parents and trainers, except from administrative support, which was only mentioned by trainers.

Two of the major beneficial features with the course framework were the social aspect and the competence of the course trainers. Meeting others, sharing their experiences, and interacting with peers may be particularly important to prospective adoptive parents (e.g., see Lee et al., 2018). In a qualitative study on the experiences of adoptive parents' after adopting a child, McKay and Ross (2010) found that emotional and practical challenges were often exacerbated by the lack of social support. Adoptive parents tended to feel isolated as many did not have access to an appropriate peer group. By attending a pre-adoption course, participants may form lasting relationships with peers that can be highly useful during the challenging period of post-

adoption.

The experienced and professional trainers made participants feel comfortable and safe. An important aspect of the course framework is that trainers are not involved in the adoption assessment process. Hence, the power dynamic outlined by Eriksson (2017), is less of an issue as parents may feel less inclined to present an overly positive image of themselves during the course (e.g., to please assessors). Furthermore, the feeling of safety generated by trainers illustrates the importance for adoption professionals to establish a good working alliance with adopters (Welters-Van De Poll et al., 2018), and to help them explore the difficult topics that are associated with adoption. Our findings are supported by Denby et al. (2011) who also reported on the need for trainers who are knowledgeable and motivated.

Informants emphasized inspirational “sunshine stories” and information about the child’s experiences prior to adoption as some of the most important parts of the course content. Similarly, adopters, in the study by Lee et al. (2018), found content related to troubles in the child’s past (i.e., trauma, maltreatment, grief and loss) particularly helpful. Moreover, Rushton and Monck (2009) noted how prospective adoptive parents in the UK valued learning about topics such as the child’s baggage and understanding the child’s past. The informants in the two studies also emphasized subjects such as child behavior problems, medical issues, and developmental delays, as some of the most important course topics. This is a significant distinction from Norwegian adopters who were less enthusiastic about being exposed to the challenges of adoption, though some acknowledged a need to confront participants that were overly optimistic. Some even described the course as lacking in nuance and being too focused on negative aspects of adoption. However, this experience is not unique to Norwegian adopters. Some U.S. adoptive parents who were dissatisfied with their adoption preparation, described it as being irrelevant and having a negative emphasis (Lee et al., 2018). One reason for these different views on adoption challenges may be that, while the Norwegian adopters were primarily told about the potential challenges, the UK adopters were also informed about sources of help. Problems may thus seem more manageable, should these arise, thereby making UK adopters view the information in a more positive light. In this regard, it is noteworthy that Norwegian adopters suggested adding more practical information on handling potential issues to counterbalance the perceived negative emphasis in the course.

In addition to being described as overemphasizing the challenges of adoption, the course content was also depicted as being outdated. Due to changes such as increased waiting times, older adoptive children, and more children with special needs (McKay & Ross, 2010; Tirella et al., 2012), there is a definite need to update the content. This seems to be unique to Norwegian adopters, as studies on adoption preparation in other countries do not describe their content as out-of-date. For instance, a recent study by Lee et al. (2018) reported on adoptive parents being dissatisfied with the type of information provided, quality issues and access to support services, but not on the recentness of the information. It may appear that most other countries are better at providing more recent information about adoption, but it also appears unusual not to have any course updates. Perhaps the Norwegian course is unusual in that it has not been updated for over a decade in the Norwegian pre-adoption course, given the political changes in adoption policies (Christopher, 2016), and hence changes in the adoptive child population. Another explanation could be that most studies on adoption preparation tend to be on domestic adoption, which is less affected by international issues, and hence there is less need for frequent updates. The Norwegian course participants’ suggestion for making the course more relevant was adding more “fresh content” such as videos of couples arriving in countries of origin or inviting people with current knowledge about the adoption process to share their experiences. Meeting and connecting with other adoptive parents have been emphasized as a helpful part of adoption preparation by other adoptive parents (Lee et al., 2018; Oldani, 2018). Learning from adoptive parents

may be beneficial to course participants as they are exposed to real-life issues and experiences (Denby et al., 2011). However, in a UK study, participants reported mixed experiences with meeting adoptive parents (Rushton & Monck, 2009), as parents did not necessarily have any advice on how to cope with the challenges of parenthood.

The need for PAS was pointed out by many informants. Although various specialized services for adoptive families do exist, such as support groups, counseling, respite care and education (Merritt & Festinger, 2013), there is currently no public service for adoptive families in Norway. This is notable, given the many post-adoption issues that may arise (Baden et al., 2013), and that post-adoption support can be effective in ameliorating difficulties in adoptive families (Hartinger-Saunders, Trouteaud, & Matos Johnson, 2015). Even in countries where post-adoption support is available, parents still report difficulties with locating and accessing relevant services (Dhami, Mandel, & Sothmann, 2007; Lee et al., 2018). Our informants had different suggestions on how to improve this, such as a continuation of the preparatory course after the adoption. Others suggested a “resource center” that could offer professional support to adoptive families, as adoptive parents have need for specific information and support that is often not provided by regular health care providers (Smit, 2010). Another suggestion was to place adoptive parents into maternity groups to meet peers and share experiences. Such a need is supported by the study of McKay & Ross, 2010 where parents in the post-adoption phase expressed a need for support from families with adoption experience. This kind of support can help parents in ways that professionals without personal adoption experience are unable to do (McKay & Ross, 2011).

Personal benefits such as gaining new knowledge and learning more about oneself, was used to describe the personal experience of taking part in the course. Participants in other adoption training courses have also reported on the advantages of gaining new knowledge, like learning parenting skills and getting to know the potential difficulties of raising adoptive children (Denby et al., 2011; Rushton & Monck, 2009). As for the negative experiences, some reported feeling uncomfortable or scared. Similar reactions were reported by Denby et al. (2011), in which the training was described as “gut-wrenching, heart-breaking, and emotionally draining”. Despite creating discomfort, this approach was viewed necessary to help prospective parents prepare for the worst-case scenario (Denby et al., 2011).

Finally, trainers were concerned about the lack of administrative support, claiming that the Directorate did not provide enough information, assistance or feedback. Administrative support has proven to be instrumental to the implementation and sustainability of programs in other fields such as medicine and education (Lyon, Frazier, Mehta, Atkins, & Weisbach, 2011; Sheldon et al., 2004), and can have a significant impact on employees motivation and job performance. For instance, adoption workers in Canada experienced that provision of post-adoption support was not prioritized by child welfare agencies or the government, which prevented them in their work with assisting families (McKay & Ross, 2011). Administrators can provide facilitative support by aligning the organization’s culture, structure, routines, training, procedures, and guidelines, with the needs of their practitioners (Fixsen, Blase, Naoom, & Wallace, 2009). The needs of pre-adoption course trainers in the present study illustrate ways in which an administration can support their adoption professionals by making changes to their organization. More specifically, the organization can provide specialized training (e.g., courses in dealing with trauma and children with special needs), alter administrative practice (e.g., practices related to salary and job description), and regularly collect and provide data to support decision making (e.g., gather feedback from trainers and using feedback to improve practice).

4.1. Implications

The present study has implications for adoption services both in Norway and internationally. The Norwegian pre-adoption course has

many strengths such as facilitating social interactions between adoptive parents and teaching them about the child's background and history. These features need to be retained in the Norwegian course and should be taken into account when developing pre-adoption services in other countries. However, there are also issues that need to be changed. For example, the course has to become more up to date with the current adoption situation and revised to deal with more contemporary issues such as older children, longer waiting times, and children with special needs. Being in a field that is constantly changing, services that deal with international adoption need to make sure that prospective adoptive parents are always aware of changes that may affect their situation. Moreover, though prospective adopters like to be informed about the child's background, some tend to be skeptical towards negative information such as potential challenges and downsides to adoption. This highlights an important challenge to delivering high quality adoption preparation: on the one hand, there is a need to make adopters aware of the challenges, but, on the other hand, there is a risk of alienating them if the information is viewed as overly problematic. Our recommendation for adoption professionals is to balance this information with what informants termed “sunshine stories”, as well as information on ways to deal with potential problems, both in terms of useful parenting skills and information about help and support services. Another finding was that there is a definite need for post-adoption services. One of the most cost-efficient ways to provide this could be to help adopters forming networks, and thus facilitating peer support among adoptive families. However, the existence of a service may not be enough. Other studies show that knowledge about such services and how to access them is also highly important.

Our findings also suggest a need for additional studies on pre-adoption training. So far, there are no studies that have examined the effect of pre-adoption courses (Drozd et al., 2017), and only a few studies have explored the experiences of adoptive parents engaged in pre-adoption training (e.g., Denby et al., 2011; Eriksson, 2017; Rushton & Monck, 2009). Moreover, there is a general lack of systematic and adequate descriptions of pre-adoption courses in other studies. This makes it difficult to compare our findings with those from other studies. Future research should accurately describe adoption services under investigation and thoroughly examine the needs and experiences of adoptive parents engaged with these services.

4.2. Limitations

This study has several strengths such as data from both participants and trainers, although important limitations were identified. First, data saturation may not have been met. Data saturation has been defined as having sufficient information to replicate a study or when the ability to obtain new or additional information is no longer achieved (i.e., when the information is, in musical terms, “variations on a theme”; Fusch & Ness, 2015). Lack of saturation impacts on the quality of a study and can affect the validity of the findings. In our study, this was not relevant for trainers because of the complete collection sampling strategy, but, for data among adoptive parents, saturation may not have been fully met because of challenges of recruitment. However, the heterogeneity of the sample (i.e., adopters were recruited from different parts of the country), and the fact that there was a considerable overlap of themes across informants, strengthens our confidence that these results are a reasonably accurate reflection of participants' views of the pre-adoption course.

A second limitation is the use of a different set of interview questions for adoptive parents and trainers. The open-ended SWOT-interview was developed to address earlier concerns about the SWOT-methodology (e.g., used to organize and stimulate discussions, rather than optimizing strategic analysis; Wijngaarden, Scholten, & Wijk, 2012). However, an open-ended SWOT would defeat its purpose in a focus group setting, because informants may artificially inflate (or deflate) the number of SWOTs through group discussions (e.g., difficult

for trainers to be exposing and critical when they work closely together in pairs). Despite the use of different interview questions, the purpose was to evaluate the pre-adoption course from multiple perspectives. We used a data-driven, inductive approach initially, to ensure that important aspects of the data were not missed, and only applied a SWOT-analysis deductively in the final analysis to compare and integrate findings from the different informants. Furthermore, the focus group format may have helped adoptive parents remember their experiences and thereby adding more information for the evaluation of the course since some parents had taken the course several years ago. Third, some of the focus group participants were couples who had adopted together. This could limit our findings, as couples would be more likely to have similar viewpoints than individuals from different families. However, we found that parents often tended to have different perspectives on the same issues, as well as being able to help each other recalling their experiences from the course years before.

5. Conclusions

This study evaluated the pre-adoption training course in Norway by examining the views of adoptive parents and trainers. The results indicated that there are various strengths and weaknesses associated with the course, concerning both the framework, content and administrative support provided to course trainers. Among opportunities, participants reported a need for post-adoption support to help adoptive families, whether it be a continuation of the pre-adoption course, a support group, or a resource center for adoptive families. These findings are in line with previous research, showing that adoptive families need specialized support that is suited to their unique situation.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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Appendix A. Questions to adoptive parents - Focus groups

A.1. Relevance

How did you feel that the course was relevant to you?

- What expectations did you have before you attended the course?
- How would you say the course matched your expectations?
- How did you feel that the course was in line with changes in the field?

A.2. Purpose

In what ways do you feel the course made you better equipped to adopt a child?

- What needs did you hope the course would cover?
- In what ways do you think the child benefited from what you learned in the course?
- Did you feel that there were some areas where the course was less appropriate?

A.3. Course execution

How did you experience the way in which the course was carried out?

- How did you experience the fact that the course took place in a group setting?
- How did you experience the course leaders?
- How did you experience the content of the course?
- How did you experience the way in which the course program was arranged?

A.4. Need for adjustments

What changes would you have made to the course?

- Was there anything missing from the course?
- Is there something the course could have had more of?
- Was anything the course could have had less of?

A.5. Need for follow-up or guidance

Have you experienced that you need follow-up or guidance after you completed the course?

- When did the need for additional follow-up arise?
- In what areas will follow-up be particularly important?
- Do you think that someone other than yourself may be in need of follow-up?

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