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EXAMINING THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE OF FOSTER CHILDREN THROUGH THE PERSPECTIVE AND EXPECTATIONS OF MULTIPLE ADULT STAKEHOLDERS

Kevin Kowalczyk

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STAKEHOLDERS

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Kevin Kowalczyk

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Kevin Kowalczyk   Mary Ellen Freeley, Ed.D.

ABSTRACT

EXAMINING THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE OF FOSTER CHILDREN

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Kevin Kowalczyk

There are roughly 400,000 children in the foster care system throughout the United States. Many of these children enter care after experiencing some sort of physical or emotional trauma. This trauma has a potentially damaging impact on the educational achievement of this scarred population. The data show that these children are at high risk for poor educational achievement. With the help of caring adults, these children can overcome barriers and achieve academic success.

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to explore the educational experience of students in foster care through the perspective and expectations of multiple stakeholders and to investigate the role that stakeholders play in the educational achievement of foster children. This qualitative study gained insight into the perspective that stakeholders have of the educational experience of foster children. In addition, this study investigated the expectations that stakeholders have of the educational achievement of foster children. Adult stakeholders—including foster parents, caseworkers, and school officials—are important for children in foster care as they serve as advocates and as a source of consistent educational support.

The participants in the study included three certified foster parents, three caseworkers and four school officials who have all had contact with school-age foster children. Through the use of open-ended interview questions, the researcher gained

insight into the perspective that stakeholders have of the educational experiences of foster children in their care, as well as the expectations they have for the academic achievement of the foster child.

The study identified seven themes—including trauma, relationships, impactful people, established habits, communication, realistic expectations, and motivation—that stakeholders believe contribute to the academic successes and failures of children in foster care. The theoretical framework selected to better understand the stakeholders' perceptions and expectations of the achievement of foster children, and their role in impacting foster children's educational experiences, was Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model (1979). Limitations, recommendations for future studies, and implications for practice were also discussed.

DEDICATION

To my wife and children who have supported me during this journey, you are my inspiration. To my parents who have always encouraged me. To all of my friends and colleagues who have guided me through this process.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Educators encounter students in the school setting who deal with difficult circumstances. Many of these students have a story to tell, but perhaps the saddest stories are the ones that some children keep to themselves. This is often the case for children in foster care, who are a nearly invisible population in the educational setting—and are arguably at the greatest risk in classrooms today.

According to the National Working Group on Foster Care and Education (2018), nearly half a million children were placed in the foster care system as of September 2016, with more than half of that population school-age children (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2018). Studies show that children in foster care are likely to have lower educational achievement when compared to their non-foster peers (Ferguson & Wolkow, 2012; Casey Family Programs, 2005; Benbenishy, Siegel, & Astor, 2018). A New York State study reported that 45% of children in foster care reported being retained at least once in school (Pecora, 2012).

Children in foster care also represent a highly mobile population. According to the National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 34% of 17- and 18-year-olds in foster care report experiencing five or more school changes. This high rate of school mobility causes significant disruptions in their educational experiences and contributes to an ominous educational outlook. The future of a foster child looks far from bright as they often end up seeing lower achievement on standardized tests; higher rates of being retained; greater absenteeism, truancy, and dropout rates; and an overrepresentation in

special education (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2018). The educational future for foster youths is dire.

To overcome these educational barriers, youths in foster care require caring and knowledgeable adults who support them and advocate on their behalf. Adult stakeholders—which include foster parents, caseworkers, teachers, and other school officials—are caring adults in the youth's life who can potentially be the source of daily, consistent educational support. A stakeholder who has knowledge of the education system and who can advocate for the child may be the adult to make the difference that these children need to tell their story and achieve academic success.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study is to explore the educational experience of students in foster care through the perspective of the stakeholders and investigate the role that stakeholders' expectations play in the educational achievement of foster children. This qualitative study gains meaning and insight into the perspective that stakeholders have of the educational experience of foster children and investigates the role that stakeholder expectations play in academic achievement.

While many studies have used quantitative data to examine the educational struggles often associated with children in foster care, this qualitative study aims to examine the educational experiences of foster children through the perspective of the adult stakeholders. This study also aims to identify important issues that stakeholders believe contribute to the academic successes and failures of children in foster care.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework selected to better understand the stakeholders' perceptions of the educational achievement of foster children in their care and their role in impacting foster children's educational experiences is Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model (1979). Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory states that individuals encounter different environments throughout their lifetime, with these environments influencing development. Bronfenbrenner proposed that the developing child is surrounded by layers of relationships. The direct and indirect interactions between these relationships impact the academic achievement of students in foster care.
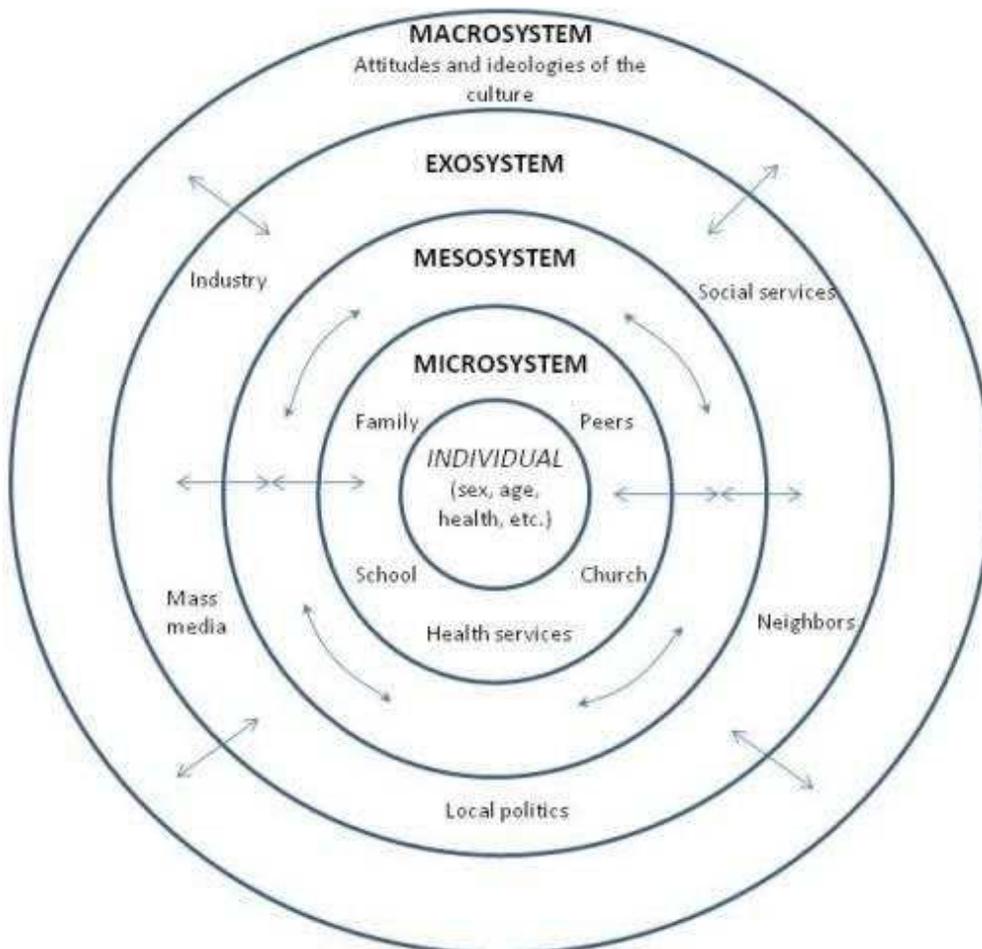
Figure 1.1: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Hchokr, 2012)

Significance of the Study

Foster children are an academically vulnerable population in the educational setting, having been identified as one of the most at-risk populations of students in classrooms today (Zeitlin & Weinberg, 2013). The invisibility of these children stems from the lack of communication between the people involved in their education and the lack of someone to oversee their education (Morton, 2016).

The invisibility is not due to a small number in population. According to the Child Welfare Information Gateway, as of September 2016 there were an estimated 437,465 children in foster care in the United States. The median age of the child in foster care as of September 30, 2016, was 7.8 years (Foster Care Statistics, 2016). Of the nearly 400,000 children in foster care, 250,000 are children of school age (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2018). The majority of children who enter the foster care system come from families in communities suffering from economic disadvantages (Zetlin, MacLeod, & Kimm, 2012). This also serves to add to the vulnerability of this high-risk group.

The National Working Group on Foster Care and Education indicates that students in foster care face significant educational challenges. Foster children, when compared to their general population peers, experience lower cognitive abilities and greater rates of absenteeism and tardiness, more frequent midyear school changes, and grade retention (Zetlin, MacLeod, & Kimm, 2012).

Studies show that 75% of children in foster care perform below grade level, and more than 50% percent have been retained at least one year in school (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2006). Research finds that half of foster youth fail to complete high school, one-

quarter of foster children end up homeless in the 12 to 18 months after being legally emancipated, and nearly a third end up in public welfare programs (Vacca, 2008; Zetlin, MacLeod, & Kimm, 2012).

The Casey Family Programs conducted a study revealing that only 1.8% of foster youth completed a bachelor's program, as compared to the 24% of the non-foster care population (Casey Family Programs, 2005).

When foster children change placement, they also often change schools. According to the National Working Group of Foster Care and Education, between 56 and 75% of foster youth change schools when first entering care, and 34% of foster youth experienced five or more changes in schools by the time they were 18 years old (National Working Group of Foster Care and Education, 2018).

Many of the academic difficulties that foster youth experience may be a result of high rates of school mobility. With the high rate of school mobility that foster youth experience, students' records are often incomplete, delayed, or missing. Often this leads to interruptions in services or misplacement in classes (Palmieri & LaSalle, 2017). Many students in foster care do not get the services they need due to the delay of school records that occur with switching schools. Often the new school is not aware of the services the student requires.

Research consistently shows that children who experience high rates of school mobility, including children both in foster care and children experiencing homelessness, perform significantly worse on standardized tests than students in stable households (National Working Group of Foster Care and Education, 2018).

Despite these bleak statistics, many foster youths, like their non-foster peers, want to succeed academically, making the improvements of educational outcomes a critical issue in society. Yet despite this topic's importance, a gap exists in the current literature with respect to understanding the issues that affect educational outcomes for youth in care.

To overcome the difficulties that many children in the foster care system experience, it is necessary to have caring and knowledgeable adults who can offer support and assistance in achieving their educational goals. Many adults may be involved in the foster youth's life, but the foster parent can have the most important impact through their daily interaction with the foster child.

There is limited research about the caregivers' involvement in the education of youth in foster care (Beisse & Tyre, 2013), and even less research on the educational experiences of foster children through the perspective of adult stakeholders. In a qualitative study that included interviews with 43 current and former foster youth in the state of Michigan, it was acknowledged by the youths that several things are needed in order to achieve academic success. They attribute their success to factors such as positive relationships with caring adults both in and out of school, access to necessary school resources, and increased involvement in extracurricular activities (Cox, 2013). Examining the educational experiences of school-age foster children through the perspective and expectations of adult stakeholders illuminates the importance of the relationships that exist between foster children and the adults in their lives.

Research Questions

The research questions that guide this study are:

1. How do adult stakeholders perceive the educational experience of foster children?

2. What do adult stakeholders believe contributes to or inhibits the academic progress of children in foster care?

3. What educational expectations do adult stakeholders have for children in foster care?

Design and Methods

The present study is a phenomenological qualitative study that explores the educational experience of students in foster care through the perspective of the stakeholders and investigates the role that stakeholders' expectations play in the educational achievement of foster children. The participants in the present study included 10 adult stakeholders who have had experience with school-age foster children. The researcher used purposeful and snowball sampling to recruit participants. The adult stakeholders included foster parents, school officials, and caseworkers.

The instrument used to collect data was face-to-face interviews with each participant. Interviews allowed the researcher to describe the experiences of a small number of individuals who have experienced the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2013).

Interview questions were created by the researcher with the assistance of two professionals who have experience in the field of education and social services. After the interviews were transcribed, all the data was thoroughly examined with the intent of identifying patterns aligned with the research questions of the study.

Definition of Terms

Adult Stakeholder: an adult who has interactions and contact with a school-age foster child and is involved in their education. This includes, but is not limited to, foster parents, caseworkers, teachers, school social workers, school administrators, and guidance counselors.

Foster Care: a temporary service provided by states for children who cannot live with their families and must be removed from their homes because their parents or guardians are not able to provide the care they need for their safety and wellbeing (Foster Care Practice Guide for Caseworkers and Supervisors).

Foster Parent: a certified foster parent who currently fosters a school-age child or has in the past.

Case Workers: the person who monitors a child's welfare while in foster care. Caseworkers in Child Protective Services investigate reports of child abuse or maltreatment, assess child safety and risk, and determine what actions are necessary to protect children and youth (Foster Care Practice Guide for Caseworkers and Supervisors).

Relative/Kinship Foster Care: relatives related by blood or marriage either in the first, second, or third degree, or beyond in the kinship line to the parent(s) or step-parent(s) of a child, may be approved as foster parents for a child (Foster Care Practice Guide for Caseworkers and Supervisors).

Foster family boarding homes: certified foster homes where the foster parents are not related to the foster child at all, or are related but not within the second or third degree, to the parent or stepparent of the child in care (Foster Care Practice Guide for Caseworkers and Supervisors).

Group homes: a family-type home for children in foster care that houses no fewer than seven and not more than 12 children at a time, provides 24-hour supervision and services, and is operated by an authorized agency (Foster Care Practice Guide for Caseworkers and Supervisors).

School Official: an employee of a school district, including teachers, guidance counselors, social workers, administrators, or other employees.

Child Maltreatment: a parent or other person legally responsible for the care of a child harms a child or places a child in imminent danger. This includes the parent not providing food, clothing, shelter, education, or medical care when financially able to do so, or the parent engaging in the excessive use of drugs or alcohol (NYS Office of Children and Family Services).

School of origin: the school the child was attending at the time of the foster care placement or at the time of a change in foster care placement (NYS Office of Children and Family Services).

District of attendance: the school district where the student placed in foster care is enrolled after a best interest determination is made (NYS Office of Children and Family Services).

Best interest determination: the local social services district must consult with relevant school personnel and others to determine whether it is in the best interest of the child in foster care to attend the school of origin or a different school. The cost of transportation cannot be a factor in determining the best interest.

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA): Enacted in 2015, this legislation outlines the district and child welfare agencies' responsibilities for school enrollment for children in

foster care and requires that states develop a plan for the funding of transportation costs (U.S. Department of Education).

Individual Educational Plan (IEP): All students who receive special educational services must have a written document that describes the educational services and goals for the students. The IEP provides an opportunity for teachers, parents, school administrators, other school staff and when appropriate the child to collaborate to improve the educational results for children with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2000).

Conclusion

As identified in this chapter the educational experiences of school age foster children are gloomy. Whether it be the experienced trauma, high rate of mobility, or the breakdown in the communication of Bronfenbrenner's microsystem, school-age foster children face a difficult uphill battle to achieve educational success. This qualitative study employing semi-structured interviews with multiple adult stakeholders addresses a gap in the research by examining the perspective and expectations that adult stakeholders have for school-age foster children.

CHAPTER 2

Review of Related Literature

This chapter provides a comprehensive review of the current research and the theoretical framework that is relevant to this study. The purpose of this study is to explore the educational experiences of students in foster care through the perspective and expectations of multiple adult stakeholders. Additionally, this study investigates the role that the stakeholders played in the educational achievement of foster children.

To address the purpose of this research, this chapter includes a review of the literature focusing on the history of the foster care system, adverse childhood experiences to which foster children are often exposed, educational achievement and experiences of children in foster care, and the role of adult stakeholders in support of the educational achievement of students in foster care. This chapter also investigates the national and state legislation geared toward students in foster care and promising programs that address their needs.

The theoretical framework includes information on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, the lens through which the study is viewed by the researcher.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework selected to better understand the stakeholders' perceptions and expectations of the educational achievement of foster children, and their role in impacting foster children's educational experiences, is Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model (1979). Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory states that individuals encounter different environments throughout their lifetime, with these environments influencing development.

Bronfenbrenner proposed that the developing child is surrounded by layers of relationships. A school-age child in the foster care system is affected by each environment within the ecological system that they are exposed to directly and indirectly. Figure 2.1 demonstrates some of the specific interactions that a school-age foster child experiences according to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological System. The direct and indirect interactions between these relationships impact the academic achievement of students in foster care.

According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), the ecological system is broken down into five systems:

1) **Microsystem:** The microsystem is comprised of the sum of interactions and relationships that children have with their immediate surroundings (Berk, 2000). The child's immediate surroundings can include parents, school, peers, and the neighborhood the child plays in. Bronfenbrenner defines the microsystem as the most direct influence in one's development (Simmons-Horton, 2017). The set of structures that an individual has direct contact with is part of the microsystem. The influences between the person and these structures flow in both directions. (Johnson, 2008). A child has social interactions in the microsystem on a regular basis. For a child in the foster care system, the microsystem includes their foster parents and other stakeholders, whom they have interaction with on a consistent basis.

2) **Mesosystem:** The mesosystem is an interaction or linkages between one or more microsystems. The mesosystem is the interaction of two or more microsystems, which can include the parent's interaction with the school, or in

the case of foster children, the foster parent's interaction with school

personnel. Stakeholders who encourage positive engagement in these external

interactions promote well-being for the youth in foster care (Simmons-Horton,

2017). By placing a value on the importance of academics and being involved

in their foster child's education, a foster parent can positively influence the

child's academic competence (Ashiabi & O'Neal, 2015).

3) **Exosystem:** The exosystem refers to social interactions which affect the

development of the child directly or indirectly. The exosystem can include the

parent's workplace, extended family, and community services. A child's

experience at home may be influenced by the type of work of the parents. The

ecosystem is broad in range and refers to a large social system

(Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Although the foster child may not have daily

encounters with this system, it does influence their development. A child in

foster care interacts with the exosystem directly or indirectly on a consistent

basis through interactions with case workers assigned to the child, the court,

and the legal system. If a judge orders the foster child to change placement,

which can result in school change, then the exosystem has a direct result on

the foster child's microsystem. The exosystem can exert a unidirectional

influence that directly or indirectly impacts a developing child (Johnson,

2008).

4) **Macrosystem:** This is the outermost layer of the model. The macrosystem

includes the laws, customs, and values of a society (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

For the student in foster care, this system includes laws and legislation

developed and passed on the issue over the years, on both the local and federal

levels. An example is the passage of the Uninterrupted Scholars Act of 2013

and Every Student Succeeds Act of 2016, both of which impact the education

of foster students.

5) **Chronosystem:** The chronosystem includes the environmental events and

transitions that occur throughout a child's life. An example of an

environmental event or transition for a foster child is the removal from their

biological parents and placement in a foster home. When a foster child

changes placement, it often results in a change in school placement.

Figure 2.1. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory applied to school-age foster

children
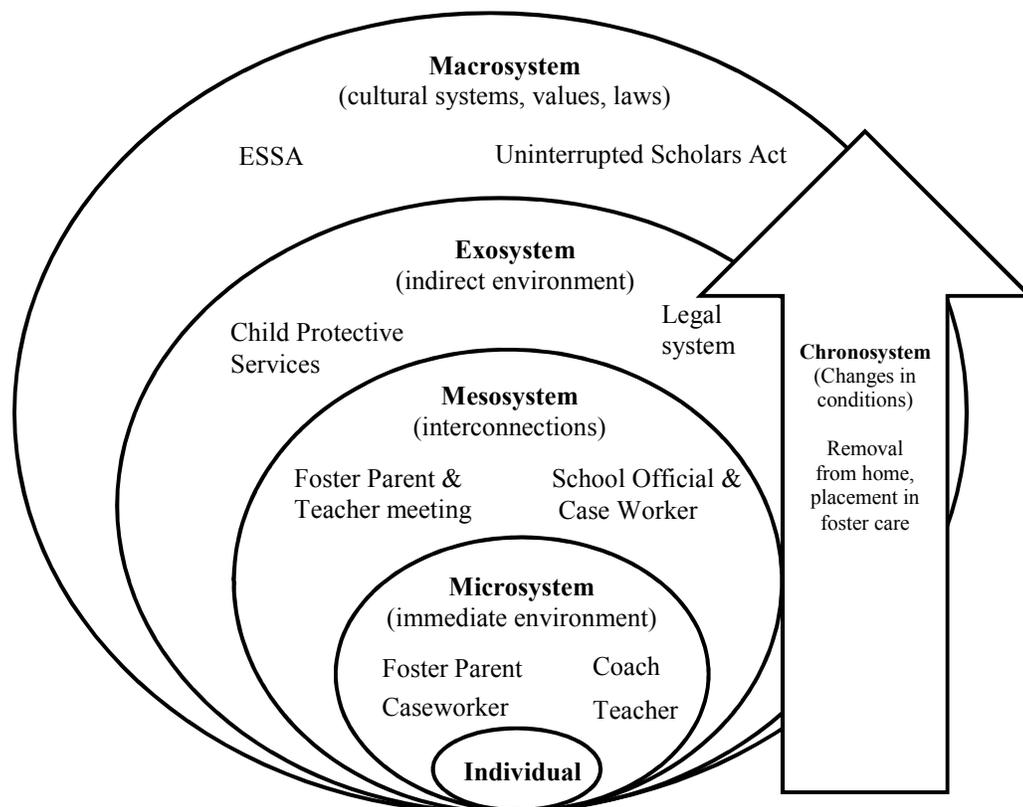
When a child is removed from their birth family, social services takes the responsibility for the well-being of that child. Social services alone cannot address the educational needs that foster students require. The social service caseworker, the school, foster parents, and the child must all work together strategically to achieve academic success (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2010).

For a child in foster care, the microsystem and mesosystem often break down, making the rest of Bronfenbrenner's structure fall apart as well. It is important for a child in foster care to receive social capital from the layers of relationships in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological System. In the review of the literature, the researcher found that educational successes were achieved by foster children who were able to find support in their relationships with adult stakeholders.

Review of Related Literature

This review of related literature focuses on the history of the foster care system, adverse childhood experiences to which foster children are often exposed, educational achievement and experiences of children in foster care, and the role of adult stakeholders in support of the educational achievement of students in foster care. This section also investigates the national and state legislation geared toward students in foster care and promising programs that address their needs.

Background on Foster Care

Foster care allows a child to be cared for by surrogate parents when his or her biological parents are not capable of providing proper care themselves. Placement in foster care is intended to be a temporary placement, with the average time children spend

in foster care being 28.6 months (Degarmo, 2015). Children are placed into the foster

care system for many reasons; these include, but are not limited to, various types of

neglect, emotional or psychological abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and other

circumstances which prevent parents from adequately caring for their children (Scherr,

2007).

Foster children are a nearly invisible population in an educational setting, making

them one of the most at-risk populations of students in a school setting (Zetlin &

Weinberg, 2013). This invisibility stems from the lack of communication between the

people involved in their education and the lack of someone to oversee their education

(Morton, 2016).

The invisibility is not due to a small number in population. According to the Child

Welfare Information Gateway, as of September 2016 there were an estimated 437,465

children in foster care in the United States. Thirty-two percent of them were placed in

relative homes, and 45% were in nonrelative foster homes. The median age of the child in

foster care as of September 30, 2016, was 7.8 years (Foster Care Statistics, 2016). The

ethnic makeup of foster children is 44% White, 23% Black, 21% Hispanic, 7%

Multiracial, 1% Asian, and 2% unknown (National Factsheet on the Educational

Outcome of children in Foster Care, 2018). Of the nearly 400,000 children in foster care,

250,000 are children of school age (Research Highlights on Education and Foster Care,

2014).

The majority of children who enter the foster care system come from families in

communities suffering from economic disadvantages (Zetlin, MacLeod, & Kimm, 2012).

There is also often a distinct disparity of placements due to race. In the United States,

approximately 12% of all black children experience an out of home placement by the age of 18. This is double the percentage of all of the children in the country who will experience a removal from their home and a placement in the foster system (Berger, Cancian, Han, Noyes, & Rios-Salas, 2015). This indicates the disproportionate representation of black children in the foster system. In addition, the schools they attend both before and after placement are often located in poor communities where the quality of education offered is of concern (Zetlin, MacLeod, & Kimm, 2012).

A study conducted in the Chicago Public School system found that students in foster care were often placed in the lowest performing schools in the city (Smithgall, Gladden, Howard, George, & Courtney, 2004). The lack of resources and funding also serve to add to the invisibility of this high-risk group.

Adverse Childhood Experiences

It is common for a child in foster care, or any child involved with Child Protective Services, to have experiences with trauma (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2015). The trauma that is experienced affects various aspects of the child's life; it can especially impact the child's learning and development while in foster care (Morton, 2018).

The trauma that forced students into foster care (e.g., neglect and abuse) may also increase their risk for post-traumatic stress disorder (Kolko et al., 2010). The initial removal from the home for a foster child, and the usual change of living placements that are common for a school-age foster child, add to their traumatic experiences (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2015).

Often the removal from a home is due to violence that a child may experience or witness. A study by Stein et al. (2001), which included interviews with 300 children in

the Los Angeles foster system, found that 85% reported witnessing a violence act, while more than half of the participants reported being a victim of violence.

Other studies show a similar experience of children being victims of direct violence and abuse. A study by Greeson et al. (2011) examined the traumatic history of 2,251 youths who are in foster care. The findings identified a high rate of complex trauma exposure. Complex trauma included physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, domestic violence, and neglect. Of the sample who participated in the study, 70% reported at least two incidences of complex trauma, with almost 12% reporting five traumatic events.

A study by Bruskas & Tessin (2013) administered a 10-item questionnaire that measured the number of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) to 101 women who have previously been in foster care. Results found that participants reported having, on average, 5.68 ACEs. Results showed that 97% of participants reported at least one ACE and 33% reported more than seven ACEs. This test, if administered to a person who has not suffered any trauma, would result in a score of zero. The more ACEs a child experiences increases the likelihood of negative outcomes in adulthood, including poor mental and physical health, substance abuse, and risky behaviors (U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016). The trauma that foster children experience before and while in care surely impacts their educational achievement.

Educational Experiences of Children in Foster Care

Beisse and Tyre (2013) labeled the educational outcome of children in foster care as "dismal," with a large proportion of foster youth in educational crisis (p.1). Research

confirms that children in foster care are an extremely vulnerable population for school failure and dropping out of school (Zetlin, MacLeod, & Kimm, 2012).

Children in foster care are at risk of school failure when compared to students in the general population. Foster children, when compared to their general population peers, experience poorer cognitive ability and increased rates of absenteeism, more school changes and grade retention (Zetlin, MacLeod, & Kimm, 2012). Studies show that 75% of children in foster care perform below grade level, and more than 50% have been retained at least one year in school (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2006).

Research finds that half of foster youth fail to complete high school, a quarter of foster children end up homeless in the 12 to 18 months after leaving foster care at the age of 18 and a third end up in public welfare programs (Vacca, 2008; Zetlin, MacLeod, & Kimm, 2012). Foster students who do complete high school are more likely to receive a GED rather than a traditional high school diploma when compared to non-foster youths (Pecora, et al. 2010). In a study that interviewed 16 former foster youths, many reported that they received consistent systemic messages encouraging them to pursue a GED over a high school diploma (Clemens, Helm, Myers, Thomas, & Tis, 2017).

Foster students can be stigmatized by school officials who make assumptions about their abilities, affecting their motivation to achieve beyond high school (Noh, 2013). The Casey Family Programs conducted a study showing that only 1.8% of foster youth completed a bachelor's degree program, as compared to the 24 percent of the non-foster care population (Foster Care Alumni Studies, 2005).

Discipline. Students in foster care show signs of behavioral challenges in school that include difficulty with rule following, low frustration tolerance, and an inability to

control impulses. These behavioral difficulties contribute to their poor academic achievement. Studies show that students in foster care have higher discipline rates than their non-foster care peers, with 24% of school-age foster children receiving at least one suspension or expulsion. The national rate is seven percent (Palmieri & La Salle, 2017).

The behavioral problems that foster children exhibit often lead to placement changes. Studies find that more than 25% of foster children were removed from the home they were placed in because the foster caregivers believed they were not able to handle the foster child's behavior (Nilsen, 2007).

School Mobility. When foster children change placement, they also often change schools. According to the National Working Group of Foster Care and Education, between 56 and 75% of foster youth change schools when first entering care, and 34% of foster youth experienced five or more changes in schools by the time they were 18 years old (Research Highlights on Education and Foster Care, 2014).

Pears, Kim, Buchanan, & Fisher (2015) conducted a study in the Pacific Northwest to describe the school moves of 86 foster children and 55 non-foster children from the same medium-sized city. The results reveal that children in foster care were 3.28 times more likely to move schools than those not in foster care, and 6.23 times more likely to have more than two school moves than students not in foster care.

Of all the school moves that foster children incurred, 78% occurred with a placement change. This suggests that it is typical for placement changes to result in school changes for children in foster care. The results also report that a greater number of early school moves were associated with poorer socioemotional competence.

Many of the academic difficulties that foster youth experience may be a result of high school mobility. Studies show that every time a student switches school, they lose four to six months of academic progress while acclimating to the new school's environment (Palmieri & LaSalle, 2017).

With the high rate of school mobility that foster youth experience, students' records are often incomplete, delayed, or missing. Many times, this leads to interruptions in services or misplacement in classes (Palmieri & LaSalle, 2017)—this is if services are even being provided.

Many students in foster care do not get the services they need due to the delay of school records that occur with switching schools. Often the new school is not aware of the services the student requires. Research shows that highly mobile children, including both children in foster care and children facing homelessness, perform significantly worse on standardized tests than students in stable households (Research Highlights on Education and Foster Care, 2014).

Stability. The stability of the school setting can make up for a lack of stability at home, but as school mobility increases, that stability is lost. A study of 1,087 former foster care alumni found that students in foster care who had even one fewer placement changes per year were almost twice as likely to graduate from high school prior to leaving the foster care system (Pecora et al, 2006).

For many youths in foster care, the school has the potential to provide stability and become their "safe haven." Nineteen young adult foster care alumni were interviewed about turning points in their lives that allowed them to be successful in a postsecondary education setting. The participants identified "safe havens," which

included both a home and school environment, that provided an escape from stress in other parts of their lives (Haas, Allenn, & Amoah, 2014).

For many students, participation in extracurricular activities offers this kind of positive escape. Research indicates that students who participate in extracurricular activities attain higher grade point averages (Knifsend & Graham, 2012). The benefits of being part of an extracurricular group also include a lower likelihood of dropping out of high school (Crispin, 2017). Participation in extracurricular and other social activities is considered important for promoting normalcy in the lives of foster youths as well (Pokempner, Mordecai, Rosado, & Subrahmanyam, 2015).

Foster students should be encouraged to participate in extracurricular activities and develop positive peer and adult relationships. Participation in extracurricular activities may reduce disengagement from school and help encourage attachment to school that can help students in foster care overcome challenges in their educational experience (Marshall et al., 2014).

A 2017 study by White, Scott, & Munson examined extracurricular participation and whether participation in extracurricular activities is associated with completing high school and attending college for students in foster care. The sample consisted of 312 foster students who were age 17 at the start of the study in the state of Missouri. Data were collected over three years during nine interviews. Results indicate that better self-reported grades and greater educational aspirations were associated with participation in extracurricular activities.

However, results of a survey developed by the National Foster Youths and Alumni Policy Council show that 45% of respondents reported that they were not

allowed to participate in extracurricular or community activities. Some obstacles that foster children face in participating in extracurricular activities are the transportation cost associated with some extracurricular activities. Currently very few states have legislation that waives the fees associated with participation in extracurricular activities for students in foster care (White, Scott, & Munson, 2017). An environment that encourages extracurricular participation for foster youth is important for their educational well-being and emotional growth.

Special Education. Many foster youths receive special educational services at a disproportionate rate compared to their non-foster peers. A study that integrated the computer databases from the Illinois State Board of Education and the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services finds that approximately 32 percent of school-age children living in foster care were receiving special education services, compared to 14 percent of students not living in foster care who received special education services (Scheer, 2007). Other studies show the disproportionate rate of foster children in special education ranging between 30 and 50 percent, compared to 11.5 percent of the general school population (Zetlin, MacLeod, & Kimm, 2012).

When students are identified as requiring services and are provided with an Individualized Education Plan, foster youths often receive one of lower quality, lacking goals related to postsecondary study or independent living skills. Foster youth who require an IEP are also less likely to have an advocate present during transitional planning than other special education students (Geenen & Powers, 2006).

An additional problem, often due to high school mobility rates, is the delay in providing foster care students with the services they need. One study shows 84% of the

foster care students identified as having special education needs did not receive the required services within nine to 12 months (Petrenko, Culhane, Garrido, Taussig, 2011).

Foster parents and case workers may not have the knowledge or experience to recognize early signs of a disability, or know what services are available or where to turn for guidance to navigate the educational system to assist the foster child (Brown & Rodger, 2009, Stanly, 2012).

Postsecondary Education. Often students in foster care, upon graduating from high school, do not enroll in college at the same rate as their non-foster peers. According to the National Factsheet on the Educational Outcomes of Children in Foster Care (2018), between 31.8% and 45.3% of students in foster care enrolled in some type of postsecondary education. The national average was 69.2% in 2015. The study also indicates that as few as three percent of foster care alumni obtain a bachelor's degree compared to the national average of 32.5%.

A study by Piel (2018) shows that 70% of youth in foster care aspire to continue their education at the postsecondary level, yet only 39% enroll in institutions, with only 10% actually graduating with an associate or bachelor's degree by the age of 25.

Impact of Adult Stakeholders

To overcome the difficulties that many children in the foster care system experience, it is necessary to have caring and knowledgeable adults in their lives who can offer support and help to achieve their educational goals. The foster parent, through daily interaction with the foster child, has the most important impact. There is limited research about the caregivers' involvement in the education of youth in foster care (Beisse & Tyre,

2013); there is even less research on the educational experiences of foster children through the perspective of the foster parents.

However, parental involvement in the educational success of non-foster students has been examined over the last three decades. Studies confirm that when parents are involved in education, students achieve academic success on multiple indicators (e.g., grades, attendance, social skills and behaviors, and graduation) (Beisse & Tyre, 2013).

In a qualitative study that interviewed 43 current and former foster youth in the state of Michigan, it was acknowledged by the youths that several things are needed in order to achieve academic success. They attribute their success to factors such as positive relationships with caring adults, both in and out of school, access to school resources, and involvement in extracurricular activities (Cox, 2013).

A 2010 study was conducted by Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shea in which caregivers were asked to discuss their views on the educational problems and needs of the foster students in their care and to give recommendations for what they required to improve the academic prospects of foster students in their care. Many of the caregivers noted that the social workers had very little time due to overcrowded caseloads. Caregivers took responsibility for the foster youth's education but felt more training was required (2010).

According to Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shea (2010), "It is clear that no single group/agency has the resources or expertise to provide the services and support required to better serve this vulnerable population of students at risk for poor educational outcome and lifetime consequences" (p.253). Many caregivers recognize that they would like to spend more time addressing the educational needs of foster children, but often behavioral

issues, court dates, and parent visits consume much of the caretaker's time. The child's educational needs were not always a top priority (Lipscomb & Choi, 2016).

Parental involvement is important to student success for both foster and non-foster children. In a 2012 study that questioned beginning general and special education teachers about their experiences instructing students living in foster care, challenges were identified that these teachers had with the caregivers, which included students not having money to buy lunch or school supplies, caregivers not attending parent/teacher nights or IEP conferences, and caregivers not signing paperwork that was sent home.

Several special education teachers felt that foster parents did not fully understand the IEP process, which made it difficult to give the child the appropriate services. Several teachers felt that "foster caregivers don't have the same level of interest in students' academic troubles or successes. They are more concerned with at-home behaviors" (Zetlin, MacLeod, & Kimm, 2012).

For caregivers, perhaps education is sometimes considered a low priority. A study by Blome (1997) found that foster parents had lower educational expectations and were less likely to monitor the homework of the school-age foster youths in their care as compared to non-foster youths.

Foster children themselves name parental involvement as an influence. In a 2006 study, 39% of children in foster care reported that no one attended their parent/teacher night as compared to four percent of children who were not in foster care.

Forty-seven percent of children in foster care reported that they had never been praised for doing well at school, compared to just three percent of children not in care (Biddulph, 2006).

An interview of 80 children in foster care found that nearly 25 percent felt that their educational progress was below average. When the foster students were asked to identify the barriers to their academic achievement, a large number reported a lack of interest on the part of caregivers, lack of support in terms of encouraging attendance, and lack of help with homework (Osbourne, Alfano, & Winn, 2010).

The influence of positive parental involvement seems to be critical for the success of foster youth. In a 2002 study by Martin and Jackson, the opinions of 38 high-achieving young people who spent at least a year in foster care were examined. The former foster adults were asked what they think are the best ways to enhance the educational experiences of foster children. Seventy-four percent of participants stressed the importance of the caregiver showing an active interest in their education and giving them support and encouragement to thrive.

The educational background and experience of the caregiver is another important factor. Research finds that the level of education of the caregiver was also an important factor in helping foster youth close the gap with their non-foster peers (Martin & Jackson, 2002).

Morton conducted a study in 2016 to explore the lived experiences of foster youth enrolled in a postsecondary institution. Eleven participants were asked, "What help, tools, or strategies did college-enrolled foster youth use to support their academic goals?" Each of the 11 participants acknowledged one solid foster parent who made a significant impact (Morton, 2016). Having a caring and supportive person in their lives helped contribute to their educational success.

A 2017 study by Clemens, Helm, Myers, Thomas, & Tis was conducted to better understand the perspective of former foster youth on their educational experience. A sample of 16 former foster youth with an average age of 21.6 years, with a range of 18 to 26 years of age, took part in the study. The former foster youth were asked to complete a demographic questionnaire asking the age they entered care, the number of home placements, the number of school changes, the number of school dropout events from seventh through twelfth grade, and the highest grade level attended. The results indicate that 40% graduated from high school, with the average foster care placement of six and the average school changes during high school of three.

This is consistent with previous research. The 16 participants were asked to take part in a focus group designed to elicit information about each participant's educational experiences as a foster youth. The participants were also asked to give recommendations for improving educational outcomes for students in foster care. The theme of family, both biological and foster, impacted the participants: "I had an incredible foster home, and my foster parents cared that I was going to school…And I had a school counselor tell me that I could only go to community college, and my foster parent went down there and got in her face and was like, 'you can't tell people that.'"

A recommendation made by the focus group was that "all students in foster care have an adult in their life who expresses a specific interest and investment in the student finishing high school" (Clemens, Helm, Myers, Thomas, & Tis, 2017).

Social Capital

Social capital is the value that is created when people invest in relationships with others through processes of trust and reciprocity (Coleman, 1988). Social networks have

value and provide social capital, which allows people to draw on others for support. Strong social networks of positive social relationships promote healthy lifelong development.

Unfortunately, children in foster care have been removed from their parents and other family members, their neighborhoods, friends, and schools. The change in living placement that foster children often experience make building strong, positive social connections difficult. Many children in foster care do not have lives that are characterized by positive interaction with their family or foster caregivers, nor do they often live in environments where they are able to develop positive social networks (Gayle & McClung, 2013).

Securing social capital is vital in the lives of students in foster care. There is a dire need for caretakers, school officials, caseworkers, and community members to promote and preserve social connections in the lives of foster youths (Foster Care Youth and Alumni, 2017). Positive adult relationships with foster youths must be with adults beyond those who are serving them in a professional manner, such as caseworkers, who will often end their relationship when the foster youths leave care.

Extracurricular activities provide foster children with the much-needed opportunity to interact with adults and peers in a safe environment and develop bonds that will persist even if the child's status in the foster care system changes (Lickteig & Lickteig, 2019).

Stroling-Goltzman, Woodhouse, Suter, & Werrbach (2016) conducted a mixed methods study to explore factors associated with educational success among youths in foster care. The foster youths reported that the most powerful influence of their

educational success was stable and "positive adult-youth relationship" (p.34). These positive relationships were with caseworkers, foster parents, teachers, and school officials.

Foster youths also reported that the educational encouragement and prioritization of school from either their foster parents, caseworkers, or teachers also played a vital role in their educational success. Several youths stated that they benefited from the emotional support provided to them by adult mentors; these mentors included foster parents, caseworkers, teachers, and school-based clinicians. This study confirms the importance of promoting strong relationships between positive adults and foster youths.

Legislation

In recent years, state and federal governments have launched efforts to increase the educational stability of and improve educational outcomes for youths in foster care. These efforts can help to lessen some of the issues faced by foster children (e.g., school mobility and availability of funding) and provide a spotlight on current conditions within the foster system to identify areas of need and improvement. Central to much of the legislation is the reinforcement of the need for educational agencies to collaborate and share information in an efficient and timely manner.

Fostering Connections to Success and Increased Adoption Act of 2008. Local education agencies and child welfare agencies coordinate to ensure that children in foster care remain enrolled in the school they attended at the time of placement, if that is in the best interest of the child. Records must be transferred immediately if the child is enrolled in a new school. States have passed laws following these federal guidelines. These state laws address specifics such as transportation to maintain children in their schools of

origin and how it will be funded. Several have appointed liaisons to support students and some have developed data systems for efficient sharing of information (NYS Office of Children and Family Services, 2018).

The Uninterrupted Scholars Act, 2013. This legislation makes it clear that child welfare professionals can access the educational records of youth in their care, even without parental consent. This act works to improve the efficiency of data sharing between child welfare and educational agencies. This is critical in ensuring school stability.

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) 2015. This act reinforces the need for local educational agencies and child welfare agencies to collaborate. Each state must develop a plan for funding transportation costs for students in foster care. Under ESSA, starting in the 2017–18 academic year, state education agencies (SEA) were required to collect and report annually on student achievement and graduation rates for all students in foster care.

A Government Accounting Office (GAO) report in 2019 sought to identify challenges that SEAs and school districts faced implementing the ESSA educational stability provision for youth in foster care. The GAO surveyed SEA foster care points of contact in 50 states in which all but one state responded. The results indicated a high turnover among local educational and child welfare agency officials. This high turnover of local staff results in a loss of knowledge and experience needed to properly implement the provisions of ESSA (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2019).

Promising Programs

There are many programs aimed at helping students in foster care that are successful. These programs aim to improve communication between agencies, help limit behavioral issues, develop self-motivation in foster students, and provide mentoring and liaison resources.

The Kids in Transition to School (KITS) program in Oregon provides intensive interventions designed to develop both the psychosocial and academic school readiness of foster children in pre-kindergarten. Results show that pre-kindergarten foster students who participate in the program display less aggressive and oppositional classroom behavior than a comparison group who did not receive the services (Pears, Kim, & Fisher, 2012).

The Take Charge Program in Oregon provides weekly coaching in goal setting and self-determination for students in special education and foster care. This is an important step in helping students to develop self-motivation. A randomized trial of 69 high school special education foster students discovered that 72% of youths who participated in the program had obtained a high school diploma or a GED. Only 50% of the control group, which contained special education foster students who were not in the Take Charge Program, received a degree (Powers, Greenen, Powers, Pommier-Satya, Turner, Dalton, Drummond, & Swank, 2012).

Another aspect of improving student achievement and educational success involves making the sharing of information more efficient and accessible to the stakeholders involved with the foster child. A county in Pennsylvania established an electronic data sharing program between the school system and the department of human

services. The program allows caseworkers to easily access the educational records of students in foster care. One of the benefits of the program is that caseworkers are automatically notified when a child has multiple unexcused absences (National Factsheet on the Educational Outcomes of Children in Foster Care, 2018).

Educational liaisons have been used by jurisdictions to provide ongoing support and advocacy for youths in foster care (Weinberg, Zetlin, & Shea, 2004). Research shows that educational liaisons build relationships with the foster youth, provide positive support, and help troubleshoot educational issues (Weinberg, Oshiro, & Shea, 2014). Educational liaisons are used for trouble-shooting educational barriers the foster students encounter and to bridge the gap that exists between Child Protective Services and the school district to provide support and advocacy for school-age children in foster care (Weinberg, Oshiro, & Shea, 2014). Multiple studies show positive results in terms of academic performance for students in foster care through the advocacy of an educational liaison (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Kimm, 2004; Weinberg, Oshiro, & Shea, 2014).

Mentoring programs assist students in foster care to establish a positive relationship with caring adults who can ideally support them in their educational endeavors and personal development (Spencer et, al. 2010). A study by Scannapieco and Painter (2014) was conducted to evaluate a mentoring program in Texas and answer the research question: Do youth in foster care benefit from a mentoring relationship with an adult across the domains of education, employment, and connections with others?

The results show that of the 45 youths who participated and completed surveys in the study, all but one enjoyed spending time with a mentor. The youths expressed that

their mentor helped them gain self-confidence, improve their academic performance, and strengthen relationships with their foster parents.

The majority of the mentors who participated in the study and completed surveys report spending most of their time working on relationship skills with authority figures, building self-confidence, and addressing school issues. The study had many limitations as the majority of the youths did not spend the recommended eight hours of face time with their mentor over the course of the year. Only three of the youths participated in the mentoring program for an entire year, while the majority of youths participated for less than six months. Research shows better outcomes for youths who meet with their mentor face to face for at least one hour a week over the course of at least one year (Tierney et al. 2009).

Conclusion

As the literature has shown, school-age children in foster care are a vulnerable population in the school system. While there are a good deal of quantitative data available on the needs of this population, the purpose of this study is to examine the perspective that adult stakeholders have of the educational experiences of foster children. By examining the educational experiences of foster children through the perspective of adult stakeholders, the researcher hopes to bridge a gap in the research and help make a neglected population in our school system more visible.

CHAPTER 3

Methods and Procedures

This methodology chapter describes in detail how the study was designed and conducted. Five areas were used in the development of this qualitative study. The first sections are the sample used in the study, including characteristics of the participants and how and why they were chosen for the study. The instrumentation section discusses how the interview questions were developed. Collection of data describes the interview process and how the data was collected and how participant confidentiality was protected. The data analysis section describes the methods used to analyze the collected data and the process used to keep the data secure. The final sections discuss the techniques the researcher used to ensure trustworthiness of the study.

Research Questions

The research questions that guided this study were:

1) How do adult stakeholders perceive the educational experience of foster children?

2) What do adult stakeholders believe contributes to or inhibits the academic progress of children in foster care?

3) What educational expectations do adult stakeholders have for children in foster care?

Participants

The participants for the study included adults who have in the past, or who are presently involved in, the educational experiences of school-age children in foster care. All of the participants chosen for this study either currently have contact with a school-age foster child or have had contact with school-age foster children in the past.

Obtaining permission to interview children in foster care is very difficult so this study examined the educational experiences of foster children through the perspective of adult stakeholders. The researcher obtained permission from stakeholders and ensured them that all of the information and data they provided would be kept confidential and anonymous. Each of the participants was given a pseudonym to protect the identity of the participants and foster children. All participants were made aware of the purpose of the study and told that they could withdraw at any time.

In a phenomenological study, the participants must be individuals who have experienced the phenomenon being explored and can articulate their conscious experiences (Creswell, 1998). Purposeful sampling was used in this study, as the researcher selected individuals for the study because they could purposefully inform an understanding of the research questions in the study (Creswell, 2013).

Snowball sampling was also used to recruit participants. Snowball sampling is a method that is used in qualitative research. It yields a study sample through referrals made among people who share or know of others who possess some characteristics that are of interest to the researcher (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). The researcher is a foster parent himself and knew of other foster parents and stakeholders who could provide information to locate others willing to participate in the study.

The researcher had a sample of 10 adult stakeholders. Three foster parents, three county case workers, and four school officials participated in the study. The criteria for foster parent participation in the study included that the foster parents (a) completed all required training to become a certified foster parent in the county they lived in, and (b)

have fostered, or are fostering, at least one school-age foster child. Table 3.1 indicates the experience and background of each foster parent in the study.

The researcher also interviewed seven other adult stakeholders who are involved in the education of foster children. Three county case workers were contacted and interviewed. All of the caseworkers had experience working with school-age foster children. All were employed by the Department of Social Services located in a suburban setting. Table 3.2 indicates the background of each case worker.

The four school officials included two high school social workers with multiple years of experience working with school-age foster children; a middle school assistant principal who had experience with school-age foster children both as an assistant principal and as a middle school guidance counselor and English teacher; and a chairperson of a high school guidance department. Table 3.3 indicates the background and experience of each school official.

The total sample size for this study was 10 adults who are stakeholders in the educational achievement of school-age foster children. Sample sizes in qualitative research is often smaller than quantitative studies but must be large enough to assert that most of the important perceptions are uncovered (Mason, 2010). Creswell (1998) recommends a sample size of five to 25 participants for a phenomenological study.

Table 3.1.

Demographics of Foster Parents

Participants/Pseudonym	Background
Foster parent 1 (Fiona)	15 years of experience as foster parent Certified Special Education teacher Multiple short- and long-term placements Currently has two school-age foster children Two biological children
Foster parent 2	30 years of experience as foster parent

(Frank)	Retired
	Three biological children
	Over 100 short- and long-term placements
Foster parent 3	14 years of experience as foster parent
(Faith)	Clerical position in school district central office
	Two biological children
	Adopted two children through foster care
	Currently has one school-age foster child

Table 3.2.

Demographics of County Caseworkers

Participants/Pseudonym	Background
Caseworker 1 (Catherine)	14 years of experience as Supervisor in Child Protective Services
	Responsible for foster children enrollment in schools
Caseworker 2 (Carl)	Assistant in Child Placement Bureau
	Point of Contact Person for Every Student Succeeds Act
	Supervises two foster care teams
	Assists with recruitment and training of foster parents
Caseworker 3 (Cassandra)	14 years of experience with Child Protective Services
	Worked as case worker in Preventative and Foster Care

Table 3.3.

Demographics of School Officials

Participants/Pseudonym	Background
School official 1 (Samantha)	15 years of experience as certified School Social Worker
	Suburban high school setting
School official 2 (Sarah)	19 years of experience as Guidance Counselor in urban high school
	15 years of experience as Department Chairperson in suburban high school
School official 3 (Susan)	24 years of experience as certified School Social Worker suburban high school setting

| School official 4 (Stephanie) | 30 years of experience as English teacher, Guidance Counselor and Assistant Principal in a suburban school district |

Research Setting

The qualitative study was conducted through face-to-face interviews. All interviews were done in person at an agreed-upon location; these locations included the private home of the participant, a school administrator's office, a child protective agencies office, and a public library.

Data Collection Procedures

Qualitative research is concerned with the process, not just simply the result or outcomes. Bogdan & Biklen (2007) identify qualitative research as being "interested in the meanings, personal narratives, and stories of the internal and experiential life of the actors, their viewpoints, and practices" (p.6). Through a series of interviews, utilizing open-ended questions, this study gained meaning and insight into the perspective and expectations that stakeholders have of the educational experiences of foster children.

The interview method allowed participants the opportunity to generously and openly answer questions (Seidman, 1991). Open-ended interviews allowed the researcher to "access the world of perspectives of the person being interviewed" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2017). Using open-ended questions also allowed the participants the ability to reconstruct their experiences with the topic under study (Seidman, 1998).

After receiving approval from St. John's University's Institutional Review Board (See Appendix A), the researcher obtained informed written consent from participants to collect data via interviews and demographic questionnaires. The researcher obtained permission from the stakeholders (See Appendix B) and ensured them that all of the

information and data they provided would be kept confidential and anonymous. Each of the participants was given a pseudonym to protect the identity of the participants and foster children. All participants were made aware of the purpose of the study and told that they could withdraw at any time.

The researcher utilized semi-structured interviews to collect data from the participants. In phenomenological investigations, the long interview is often the method used to collect data on the research topic (Moustakas, 1994, Creswell, 1998). Interviews allowed the researcher to analyze the meaning of the experiences of a small number of individuals who have experienced the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 1998).

Interview questions were open ended and designed to guide the conversation and allowed for follow-up questions based on the participants' response (Seidman, 2013). The researcher used follow-up questions to encourage the participants to individualize and expand upon their responses when appropriate. This interview method allowed the researcher to choose the sequence and order of questions in advance (Patton, 2015).

Interview questions were developed from research and review of the literature on the topic. The researcher also had multiple face-to-face meetings with two professionals who have experience with the topic in order to obtain information that proved helpful for the researcher's question development.

Once the questions were developed, the researcher reached out to these professionals to have them validate the questions and provide their professional opinions. These professionals included a foster parent who has multiple years of experience fostering school-age children. The other professional is a professor of education and a publisher of books on the topic of foster care. Both of these individuals were very open to

the process and added quality and validity to the interview questions that the researcher developed (See Appendices C–E).

A pre-interview orientation contact took place with the researcher and the participants so that the subjects understood what was expected. These pre-interview meetings were conducted either over the phone, through emails, or through text messages. A few of the participants had never been part of a study before and therefore had many questions. The researcher explained the plan for the interviews and the time constraints required. The pre-interview also ensured that the participants met the qualifications for the study. The researcher explained that there would be no remuneration for participation in this study.

Interviews with the participants were done in person at an agreed upon time and location and were recorded and transcribed using Rev Recorder. All interviews began with a social conversation aimed at creating a relaxed and trusting atmosphere (Moustakas, 1994). Multiple recording techniques were used in order to maintain accuracy in the data. Participants' remarks and responses were recorded in writing by the researcher during the interview process. In addition, when permission was granted, audio recordings were conducted to minimize human note-taking errors. This also served to allow the researcher to be more attentive to the interviewee, providing a richer and more textured account.

The researcher also had the opportunity to draw from the respondents' actual statements when adding descriptors, providing for less inferences. The researcher reserved the right to modify and adapt questions as needed to solicit information from the stakeholders. Following each interview, the audio files were transcribed and analyzed to

serve as a guide for the next interview and as a comparison between the other participants.

During the interview, the researcher also documented any nonverbal emotions that the participants expressed during the interview. The audio recordings were transcribed for each interview as close to the date of the completed interview as possible.

All interviews and data derived from interviews were kept confidential to protect the interviewees' privacy, as per IRB guidelines. Removal of identifiable information, like names and cues for the specific place a person worked, served to reduce the possibility of breaking confidentiality. There was protection of confidentiality in that all of the recordings and transcripts were kept secured in a locked location by the researcher.

After the dissertation has been defended, and with the instruction of the researcher's advisor, the transcripts will be destroyed.

Trustworthiness of the Design

Creswell (2013) recommends using multiple approaches to ensure the reliability and validity of a qualitative study. Some of the techniques that the researcher used to ensure reliability and validity of the study included member checking, thick description, triangulation, clarifying researcher's bias, and peer debriefing. The researcher focused intentionally on maintaining trustworthiness throughout the study, from recruitment of participants, developing interview questions, and analyzing and interpreting data.

Member Checking: The researcher in this study met with participants after the interviews and provided the participants with an opportunity to comment on the findings. Creswell (2013) advocates that the researcher share findings with the participants to determine whether the participants feel the findings are accurate. The strategy of member

checking provided interpretive validity and ensured the researcher accurately portrayed the meaning attached by participants to what is being studied by the researcher (Johnson, 1997).

Thick Description: This study included the participants' actual words and statements and utilized data from interviews to create descriptions that would convey the participants' perception of the educational experiences of foster children. The researcher incorporated details that thickly describe the phenomena, allowing the readers the feeling that they experienced or could experience the event being described (Creswell, 1998). By providing detailed descriptions using the participants' own words, the researcher made the results more realistic. By providing thick descriptions of the data and the research process, the researcher enabled readers to make informed decisions about transferring to other settings and people (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Triangulation: Creswell (2013) encourages researchers to use multiple and different sources to provide validating evidence. The researcher collected data from interviewing multiple stakeholders. Including multiple perspectives provided validity to the findings. Data triangulation allowed the researcher to collect multiple sources of data using a single method (Johnson, 1997). Through triangulation of multiple sources, the researcher examined the consistency of different data sources within the same method (Patton, 1999). The researcher conducted multiple interviews with multiple participants. Through rich information gathered from different people and different points of view, the researcher develops a better understanding of the perspective and expectations that stakeholders have toward the educational experience of foster children.

Bias: In a qualitative study, the researcher is often the instrument that conducts the qualitative inquiry and must include information about him or herself (Patton, 1999). The researcher is a foster parent himself. This was stated in the study so readers can understand the researcher's position and any biases. The researcher eliminated bias in the study by including how the researcher's interpretation of the findings may be shaped based on the researcher's past experiences, bias, and prejudices (Creswell, 2013).

Through reflexivity, the researcher actively engaged in critical self-reflection about his potential biases as a foster parent (Johnson, 1997). The researcher utilized the Epoche process to set aside prejudgments regarding the educational experiences of foster children (Moustakas, 1994).

Peer Review or Debriefing: The researcher worked closely with an experienced foster parent who has experience in the field of education. The peer debriefing acted to keep the researcher honest, and ask the difficult questions about methods, meaning, and interpretations (Creswell, 2013). The peer reviewer challenged the researcher to provide solid evidence for any interpretations or conclusions (Johnson, 1997). The use of a peer reviewer provides the study with interpretive validity and ensures that the researcher accurately comprehended and portrayed the participant's meanings.

External validity: External validity refers to what level the results can be generalized to other situations (Merriam, 2009). External validity is difficult to establish in qualitative research due to the fact that qualitative research focuses on specific people. Often qualitative research aims to show what is unique about a certain group of people or events and are not meant to be generalizable. The results of the current study meet the qualification for naturalistic generalization—the process of generalizing based on

similarity (Johnson, 1997). By providing specific details and descriptions of the stakeholders and their experiences meeting the educational needs of foster children, the researcher was able to apply the findings of this study to similar circumstances. By providing sufficient details of the data and research process, the researcher enabled readers to make informed decisions about the degree to which the findings can be generalized to other settings and people.

Research Ethics

The researcher recruited participants through snowball sampling. The researcher reached out to local foster care caseworkers to obtain the name of foster parents who would qualify for the study. At the recruitment phase, and again at the start of the interview, the researcher verbally and in writing explained confidentiality to the participants.

The researcher obtained permission from the stakeholders and ensured them that all of the information and data they provided would be kept confidential and anonymous. Each of the participants was given a pseudonym to protect the identity of the participants and foster children. All participants were made aware of the purpose of the study and told that they could withdraw at any time.

All of the participants completed the entire interview process without incident. No participant showed refusal to answer questions or expressed interest in withdrawing at any time. All of the collected interview data was kept safe and secure with a password on the researcher's personal computer and in a lockbox.

The participants in the study were all adults involved in the education of school age foster children. The target population used in the study was not considered a

vulnerable population. Due to the focus of the study, the researcher decided not to question or interview the foster children in any way. The confidentiality and emotional safety of the participants were of the utmost concern to the researcher.

Data Analysis Approach

Data were collected and analyzed. The researcher reviewed the data from the interviews and demographic questionnaires and multiple methods of coding were used. Charmaz (2001) describes coding as the "critical link" between data collection and their explanation of meaning.

The researcher searched through data for patterns in an organized fashion, utilizing coding to label, categorize, connect concepts, and develop themes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). After all of the interviews were transcribed, all the data were read and reread with the intent of identifying patterns aligned with the research questions of the study.

The researcher utilized multiple phases of coding. Phase one coding was descriptive coding, also known as topic coding, which used words or short phrases that briefly summarized the basic topic of the data. Descriptive coding seeks to answer questions such as "What is going on here?" (Saldana, 2016). The process of coding is essential to segment and label the data to establish broad themes (Creswell, 2012). The data were divided into sections related to the interview questions and then reviewed for commonalities.

Moustakas (1994) suggested the use of verbatim examples. The researcher developed a description of each participant's experience as an adult stakeholder in the

education of school-age foster children using verbatim excerpts from the interview transcript.

One of the coding methods used by the researcher included In Vivo coding. In Vivo coding uses the actual language found in the data or the terms used by the participants themselves (Saldana, 2016). Coding with the actual words of the participants allowed for a better understanding of the participants' views.

Phase two coding was conducted with the goal of developing a more select list of categories, themes, and concepts. Phase two coding included Pattern Coding, which pulled together data from first-cycle coding into more meaningful and parsimonious units of analysis (Saldana, 2016). Commonalities from the participants' responses were organized into themes that addressed the research questions. A coding sheet was created (See Appendix F).

Researcher Role

The researcher is a secondary school teacher who has in the past educated children in the foster care system. The researcher is also a certified foster parent. Moustakas (1994) suggests that the researcher engages in disciplined and systematic efforts to set aside prejudgments, beliefs, and knowledge of the educational experience of children in foster care.

The researcher utilized a peer reviewer to help identify any biases. The peer reviewer challenged the researcher to provide solid evidence for any interpretations or conclusions (Johnson, 1997). As stated by Paton 1999, "The researcher should strive neither to overestimate, nor to underestimate, their effects, but to take seriously their responsibility to describe and study what those effects are (P. 1203)."

The researcher recognized that the primary source of data collection in this study were interviews, which therefore makes the researcher the main instrument of data collection. Since the researcher has experience as a foster parent, it is important to make the process of data collection and analysis as transparent as possible (Ortlipp, 2008).

The researcher kept a reflective journal as a way to recognize bias and make it clear as to how the researcher's experiences may influence the research process. The following is an example of one entry that the researcher entered at the very beginning of the research process:

> I am a teacher and have been for the last 20 years. I now find myself a student enrolled in a doctoral program. I am also most proudly a husband and father of two beautiful daughters.

> A few years ago, my wife introduced me to the idea of becoming a foster parent. Over the last few years, we have had the opportunity to foster several children, most for short time periods and one for many years.

> This experience has guided my research topic. I would like to explore the educational experience that children in the foster care system face. I feel that other foster parents can shed light on the educational experiences of the children in their care. I plan to explore the educational experience of foster children through the eyes of the adults in their lives.

> The reflective journal allowed for self-reflection as a researcher. The researcher disclosed the information from the entries with the participants in the study.

Conclusion

The methods described here provided the researcher with a means of addressing three research questions.

1) How do adult stakeholders perceive the educational experience of foster children?

2) What do adult stakeholders believe contributes to or inhibits the academic progress of children in foster care?

3) What educational expectations do adult stakeholders have for children in foster care?

The coding and analysis of the data provided the researcher with the ability to draw conclusions about the educational experiences of school-age foster children through the perspective of various adult stakeholders in the life of these children.

CHAPTER 4

Results

This study aimed to examine the educational experiences of foster children through the perspective and expectations of multiple adult stakeholders. Specifically, the study was designed to answer the following research questions:

1) How do adult stakeholders perceive the educational experience of foster children?

2) What do adult stakeholders believe contributes to or inhibits the academic progress of children in foster care?

3) What educational expectations do adult stakeholders have for children in foster care?

The data to answer these research questions were gathered through a total of 10 interviews with multiple adult stakeholders who have experience with school-age foster children. Through triangulation of multiple sources, including foster parents, caseworkers, and school officials, the researcher examined the consistency of different data sources within the same method (Patton, 1999). After analysis of the data, the researcher identified seven themes that apply to the research questions. The seven themes include trauma, relationships, impactful people, established habits, communication, realistic expectations, and motivation. This chapter presents the key findings and themes that emerged from the research.

Description of Participants

As discussed in Chapter 3, this study included interviews with a total of 10 adult stakeholders who are involved in the education of school-age foster children. The interviews were conducted over a course of three months. All of the interviews were

recorded and transcribed. The following is an in-depth description of the participants who were interviewed by the researcher.

Fiona is a married woman who has been a foster parent for 15 years and has two school-age foster children in placement. She and her husband also have two biological children of their own. She is a certified special education teacher, but currently is not working outside the home. She is an advocate for foster parents and involved in foster care support groups.

Frank is a married man who has been a foster parent for 30 years and has adopted three children from foster care. He is currently retired and estimates that more than 100 foster children have been placed in his home over the past 30 years. He has three biological children. At the time of the interview, he had two school-age foster children placed in his home.

Faith is a married woman who has been a foster parent for 14 years and has adopted two children from foster care. She and her husband also have two biological children. Through the 14 years of fostering she has had eight placements. She is a professional in the business office of a school district. At the time of the study, she had one school-age foster child placed in her home.

Catherine is a supervisor in the department of Child Protective Services in a suburban county. She has 14 years of experience with children in the foster care system. Her responsibilities include the placement of foster children and ensuring the enrollment of foster children in school.

Carl is an assistant supervisor for the child placement bureau, and also the point of contact person for the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015. He has 11 years

of experience working with children in foster care. He assists with the recruitment and training of foster parents and works with foster and biological families of children in foster care.

Cassandra has 14 years of experience in Child Protective Services. She has worked in both the preventative and foster care units.

Samantha is a school social worker in a suburban high school with 15 years of experience. She has worked with both foster students and foster parents to provide services for students in foster care.

Sarah is a chairperson of the guidance department in a suburban high school with 34 years of experience. Nineteen of the years were spent serving as a guidance counselor in an urban district. For 15 years she has worked as a guidance department chairperson in a suburban high school.

Susan is a school social worker in a suburban high school with 24 years of experience. She has been involved in the education of multiple foster students and provides services to both foster students and foster parents.

Stephanie is an assistant principal in a suburban middle school. She has 30 years of experience working with school-age foster children as a teacher, counselor, and now as an assistant principal. She has worked with foster children in all of her mentioned roles in the school system.

Research Question 1: How do adult stakeholders perceive the educational experience of foster children?

The researcher sought to examine how adult stakeholders perceive the educational experience of school-age foster children. Interview data revealed that adult stakeholders

feel that the educational experiences of foster children is one that often is signified by a breakdown of relationships.

For children in foster care, often the layers of relationships that surround them fall apart either in their early years or later in their school-age years. This breakdown often results in foster children developing into a vulnerable population in the school system.

Through interviews with adult stakeholders, the following themes emerged from the data: trauma and relationships.

Trauma: The researcher discovered that all of the participants believe that the educational experience of foster children is often branded by trauma. Many students in foster care experience trauma that has forced them to be removed from their birth parents by Child Protective Services.

The following information was shared by Fiona, and depicts an extreme example of abuse and trauma that some children in foster care experience:

> When she (foster child) was 12 or 13, things were getting so bad, she was cutting herself…wasn't going to school, very promiscuous, abusing drugs and alcohol, no supervision…the mother allowed a prostitute to move into the house, who took over the (foster child's) room and started turning tricks. The child was forced to sleep on the floor in the living room. The prostitute was also an alcoholic and very abusive to the (foster child).

While this is just one extreme example shared with the researcher about the type of trauma that children in foster care may have experienced, all of the caseworkers in the study indicate that children in foster care have experienced some type of trauma causing

them to be separated from their birth parents. The removal from their home can alone cause emotional stress and have psychological effects.

> A lot of students that are in foster care have had traumatic beginnings, whether that is in utero with drug use, or alcohol use, or just witnessing traumatic events, domestic violence. There's obviously a reason that they're taken from the home (Samantha, School official).

The emotional, physical, and psychological issues that many foster students develop have the potential to sidetrack students from academic success. Faith expressed that the trauma that students in foster care have experienced make them a vulnerable population in the school setting.

> Amongst all the other stressors that they (foster students) are going through and traumas and things they're going through, I think a lot of time the school is the last thing on their minds or focus. A lot of time their focus is they want to get back to their parents, no matter what horrific situation they've been through (Carl, Caseworker).

> School is often not a high priority for students in foster care as many times the educational needs of students in foster care take a backseat to other pressing issues, as Carl expressed:

> The top priority is the immediate safety of the child. Bringing the child into the foster home, having the child acclimate to their foster home...a lot of time then there are other activities as far as our legal requirements, as far as having to be in court to deal with the legal aspect of a child entering foster care. Then making

sure the child's medical coverage is in place…I think then the school falls kind of in.

Susan mirrored these thoughts and even shared the importance of meeting basic needs of children. She pointed to a poster of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs she keeps in her office. For the caseworkers and school officials of these children, addressing basic needs must come first before the child receives any educational support.

As Susan states, "If the basic needs are not being met, their food, water, their sleep…if those things are not continuous and constant, then nothing else can be built upon."

Many students in foster care require extra attention and encouragement from school officials, foster parents, and caseworkers. "Early trauma has lasting effects that cannot ever be eradicated…you can't turn back time. You can only move ahead and try your best" (Sarah, School official).

Relationships: All of the foster parents and caseworkers expressed that it is important for students to build positive relationships with both peers and adults. Two of the foster parents expressed that for school-age foster students in their care, building positive adult relationships is challenging. Before foster children come into care, their relationships are often fractured and chaotic. While many school-age foster children may value opportunities to build positive relationships with school officials, many of them find it difficult. All of the school officials expressed that often students in foster care have difficulty opening up and asking for help from school personnel.

You get very guarded, shielded type of responses…there is this fear that if I share and connect, this person could leave me…Their ability to make connections with

adults is limited. That's a deficit…if they are able to realize that pupil support staff, teachers, and adults here want to help, that's a huge level of success (Sarah, School official).

Students in foster care may be guarded, unwilling to seek out school personnel for support in fear it may lead to another disappointing relationship. While all school officials stated having difficulties developing relationships with students in foster care, they keep endeavoring to develop a positive relationship with those students because the opportunity is there to build a positive relationship. As Stephanie stated, "You have to work very, very, very hard to win their trust, but when you win their trust, then they'll seek you out."

Nine of the participants articulated that building peer relationships for students in foster care can also be difficult. The ability to form personal relationships with classmates for school-age students in foster care is often hindered by their high rate of school mobility. Stephanie shared an experience with a student in first grade who had already been in six homes. She observed the child in the classroom being very needy with the teacher and having difficulty interacting with peers. Multiple school changes described by Stephanie disrupted the student's ability to form positive peer relationships.

All foster parents and school officials expressed that many foster children avoid relationships with school peers and teachers and hide their status as a foster child. As Sarah shared, "Many foster children keep it private. It's totally a blemish that they would not want to make known." Susan shared that many students in foster care find it "embarrassing" and do not want teachers or other students to know.

The researcher found that building positive peer relationships was a top priority for many adults in the foster student's life. Extracurricular activities provide an opportunity for school-age foster children to develop positive adult and peer relationships. All foster parents report that having the children in their care involved in afterschool and extracurricular activities was a priority and was supported by the county in most cases.

Carl shared an incident that showed the commitment to allow a foster student to participate in afterschool activities:

> We had a student last year that was part of the lacrosse team. We had worked with the school district as far as transportation, but practices went past 6 p.m., and the school was not going to provide transportation…So we worked out an arrangement where the Department of Social Services then ended up paying for the bus…so he could still participate in the experience.

All of the caseworkers articulated that when students are placed into foster care or have a change in living arrangement, the Department of Social Services must determine whether the child will attend his or her school of origin, or a new school located in the school district of the foster family. As Catherine states, "We try to keep them in their home district as much as possible. It doesn't always work out that way."

All of the caseworkers stated that they will try to provide transportation to allow that foster child to remain in their school of origin. However, Frank found that leaving the foster child in their original school was a hindrance on both the child and foster parents: "By keeping them in their original school district, it curtails afterschool activities." Frank went on to explain that he was often forced to transport the child to

afterschool activities and the distance and time made it hard for the foster child to make and maintain peer relationships. He also mentioned that the distance made it difficult for the foster child to attend birthday parties and other social events with his friends.

Participants expressed that the educational experience of foster children is impacted by trauma and the relationships they have with peers and school officials. The difficulties they have addressing these obstacles often makes education less of a priority for these students. Many adult stakeholders recognize the necessity of helping students cope with the trauma they have experienced before adding the stress of academic achievement. They view the educational experiences of foster students as being marred by trauma. Further challenging students is the inability to form solid relationships with peers and adult stakeholders. All participants feel that until these needs are met, educational achievement is affected.

Research Question 2: What do adult stakeholders believe contributes to or inhibits the academic progress of children in foster care?

The researcher sought to identify what adult stakeholders believe contributes to or inhibits the academic progress of school-age foster children. Through interviews with adult stakeholders, the following themes emerged from the data, including impactful people, established habits, and communication.

Impactful people: For a child in foster care, the people who they trusted the most often let them down. Research supports the notion that children have better educational achievement if they have close and meaningful relationships with members of their family (Courtney,et al., 2001). Unfortunately for children in foster care, their relationships with their immediate environment have often broken down.

All of the participants were asked who they believed to be the most important person in a foster child's life to help him/her achieve their educational goals. All but one of the participants expressed that the foster parents, due to the time they spend with the foster child, have a great ability to contribute to the academic achievement of the foster child in their care. As Samantha stated when asked who they felt was the most important person in a foster child's educational achievement:

The foster parents, absolutely. The person they have daily dealings with…then second to that would be teachers, or any school member…but the (foster) parent providing structure, providing time to do homework, providing a safe environment at home. I think nothing beats that.

All of the participants in this study placed an importance on being a caring and nurturing influence for the foster students in which they came into contact. Foster parents in this study particularly showed signs of providing foster children with loving support. "I think once they know that you show an interest in them, trying to help them succeed, they pick up on that" (Frank). The three foster parents in the study all shared that they treat the children in their care as if they are their own.

Stephanie supported the idea of the foster parent as the most important person for the foster child. "I think it was the advocacy of the foster parent. That's what I think it was, I think the kid landed in the right foster home."

While all of the participants expressed that many adults may be involved in the foster youth's life, the foster parent, through daily interaction with the foster child, has the most important impact. Even though the participants reported that the foster parents have the greatest opportunity to provide the support that a school-age foster child needs

in order to achieve academic success, all four school officials report that not all foster parents are capable of providing that support.

"Foster parents run the gauntlet, just like regular parents, good, bad, and indifferent" (Sarah, School official). Another school official stated that she has had mixed experiences when dealing with foster parents. Sarah shared her experience with the many foster parents that she has worked with over her 24-year career:

It has become abundantly clear that some people unfortunately are just in this for the money…then there are those who are truly invested in seeing this child through and even adopting them and making them part of the family. When you have that kind of (foster) family, you have huge investment, sometimes even more investment than someone with a biological child.

While both caseworkers and school officials expressed a desire to be an important person in the life of the foster child, helping them to achieve academic success, they lack the quality time needed to invest into the relationship. This is required in order to break though the many issues of trust and self-esteem that many participants report are exhibited by foster children.

Cassandra expressed that no matter how much she wants to be the person who can impact the education of the foster child, she lacks the face time with the student that only foster parents can provide. "I wish I could be that person for the child to help motivate them…But as a caseworker, you see them like once a month. You see them for an hour, maybe an hour and a half. You don't have the relationship with the child to build the child up."

Sarah also expressed frustration with the lack of time to address the specific needs of students in foster care. She shared that in her building, "there is one social worker for 1,800 students." This makes it difficult for school officials to have the time to form a relationship with the foster children in their schools.

Two out of the three caseworkers who participated in this study expressed that they often are overworked and have caseloads of 10 or 12 children, which only allows them to see the foster child once a month. Cassandra stated that she would like to spend more time with the foster child but "the caseworker has to do all of the paperwork…and there's so many little things that the caseworker does on a daily basis for just one case." The caseworkers, along with eight of the other nine participants, agreed that the foster parents are "absolutely" the people who have the greatest impact on the educational achievement of the foster child.

While all of the caseworkers and school officials expressed the important role the foster parents potentially play in the educational achievement of the foster child, three of the four foster parents report that supportive caseworkers and school officials have assisted them in the pursuit of educational success for the foster child in their care. As Fiona recounted, "The caseworker was relentless, and she was so persistent…she wanted to do right by the kid, she was a good caseworker".

Frank also had a positive experience to share about a caseworker: "If there was a problem, like trying to get the foster child into a class that the child really needs…they would go up to the school and try to arrange it." Faith also cited the invaluable help she received from a caseworker: "The caseworker went with me to register them in school, so she was part of the registration process. She had to provide the documentation."

All four school officials had mostly positive relationships when dealing with the foster child's caseworker. Two of the school officials report that the caseworkers were involved with the education of the foster child to some degree, either with the registration or calling the school to check up on the attendance of the foster child.

Samantha reports that the caseworkers would have contact with the school about once a month. She explained that they would inquire about grades and attendance. "I am sure they are overworked, and I'm sure they have way too much of a caseload to get details on every student" (Samantha, School official). Even though all of the participants expressed that they believed that caseworkers were overworked, Stephanie shared an exceptional story of a caseworker:

> This particular foster care worker that I dealt with was phenomenal, completely invested. Came to things at her school anytime we had an issue, she'd come to school and meet with us. She was exceptional in every way.

All of the participants expressed that while one adult may have the potential to greatly impact the educational achievement of a foster child, the efforts of all adults in the life of the foster child may be needed to help him or her achieve educational success. As Catherine states:

> I don't know that there's one specific person. I think you have to have involvement between all of the parties. The child has to be engaged, the caseworker has to be engaged, the foster parents, and the biological parents have all got to be on the same page…the hardest part is getting everybody on the same page.

Carl described it as a "cooperative partnership between all parties involved." This idea of the whole adult network cooperating together for the best educational interest of the foster child was also expressed by Stephanie who used the analogy of a tripod. "It's the foster parents and the school staff—a tripod of adults" who have the ability to impact the education of a foster child.

The village of adult stakeholders who the participants identified as being involved in the education of a foster child often include foster parents, school officials, caseworkers, and sometimes also the biological parents of the child. One participant identified another, often-overlooked adult, who has the potential to have the greatest impact on the education of the foster child: the judge.

Cassandra describes the judges she works with as very concerned adult stakeholders in the education of the foster child. "This one judge in particular is very conscientious about education and how well our children are doing in school. So, they like to see all the IEPs, they like to see report cards every time we see the judge."

This caseworker also reported that judges will do their best to ensure that students in foster care are not forced to miss school for court unless it is a special permanency hearing. The one person that all of the foster parent participants express have very little interest in the education of the foster child is the biological parent. Foster parents in this study describe the involvement of the biological parents as not invested, having too many problems of their own, and not being concerned with the child's schooling. When foster parents were asked if the biological parents ever attended or asked to attend school meetings or IEP meetings, the answer was an explicit "no."

The participants expressed that the cooperation of all adult stakeholders invested in the educational development of the school-age foster child is essential for that child's academic success. The interaction between the foster parents, the school, the caseworker, the biological parents, and the judges impacts the developing foster child's education. Although, as the participants expressed, for many school-age children in foster care this cooperation among impactful people often breaks down.

Established Habits: A factor that was identified as both contributing to and hindering the educational success of school-age foster children is the age at which they enter the foster care system. Two of the caseworkers and two foster parents express that the earlier a child is removed from the toxic living arrangement and is placed in a stable, supportive environment, the better it is for the child's educational achievement. As Cassandra stated:

> In my experience, the older the child is when they enter foster care, the harder it is
> to get them to have educational success…Sometimes they didn't go to school a lot
> when they were with their parents. If they're coming in at 16 or 17 years old,
> they've had such a long history of not going to school, not caring about school,
> that it's hard to change that in a child…The younger the child, I've found the
> better they do in the school setting when they're in foster care.

The lack of importance placed on education by a child's birth parents can hinder the foster child's education. All of the foster parent participants expressed that prior to coming into their care, many of the foster children had minimal structure in their lives. As Fiona expressed, "there was no structure to their lives, they weren't used to sitting down at the table to do homework, there wasn't even a table to do homework at." Frank

expressed that sometimes biological parents allowed the child to miss many days of school, sometimes up to 40 days. It was expressed by one of the participants that when a child was removed and placed into a stable foster home, their school performance increased. Cassandra stated:

> Kids do much better when they go into foster homes on a whole, because they are being cared for properly…I've seen a lot of cases where teachers will comment to me, 'The kids come to school now on time, they're not sleeping in class, they are well groomed, not hungry.

The positive attention that a foster home provides can show immediate effects in the school setting. Even though this may not manifest itself in better grades immediately, it lays the foundation for the possibility of better academic achievement in the future.

Communication: Many school-age children in the foster care system have many adults in their lives, but sometimes lack adults to advocate for them in the school setting. All of the foster parents in this study report that they feel very comfortable advocating for the foster children in their care. All of the foster parents in this study have had biological children of their own who previously went through the school system. This familiarity with the school system gave them the confidence to advocate for the school-age foster child in their care and maintain open lines of communication with the school. As Fiona, who is also a certified special education teacher, summed up, "This school has been great…I already had a relationship with the school."

All of the other foster parents reported having a good relationship with the school district. Of the foster parents who participated in this study, two of them have had

employment with a school district as well, helping to facilitate their communication with the school.

Children in foster care are overrepresented in special education; 35 to 50% of children in foster care receive special education services compared to 10% of the entire population (Zetlin, 2010). The researcher found that all of the foster parents and caseworkers expressed that they had the knowledge and experience to recognize signs of a disability, and the knowledge of how to get the appropriate services for the foster child in their care.

However, this is not always the case, as Susan shared experiences with foster parents who were not open to communication, especially in regard to special education services:

> I've sat in (IEP) meetings where the foster parents are not there and the committee will say, 'Oh, we can't even reach this one. We can't find them. They don't come to anything.' And then the opposite, where it was a family…they were there for everything and if they couldn't be there, they were on the phone. They were always just a phone call away.

The general consensus of the participants in this study was that communication between impactful people can alter educational achievement for a school-age foster child. A lack of communication inhibits achievement.

As one participant noted, it is important to recognize that the school-age foster child themselves should be included in these connections. Sarah stated, "Their ability to make connections is limited…If they are able to realize that adults here want to help,

that's a huge level of success," making communication a factor that contributes to academic progress.

Research Question 3: What educational expectations do adult stakeholders have for children in foster care?

The researcher sought to identify what educational expectations adult stakeholders had for children in foster care. Through interviews with adult stakeholders, the following themes emerged from the data: realistic expectations and motivation.

Realistic Expectations: All of the participants expressed that they would like to see school-age foster children achieve to the best of their ability. The participants were realistic when discussing specific expectations for the school-age foster children in their care. When asked what she expects from foster children in her school, Samantha states:

> A high school diploma, so they can move on with their life in college or work. Another part has to be the social component, feeling accepted, feeling assimilated to the building…maintaining those smaller educational goals, to get them to the goal where they graduate.

This school official described a chart that she provides to students in foster care and their foster parents so they can "check off the requirements that they have to fulfill to get closer to their goals." Sarah expressed that her expectations for school- age foster children has much more to do with social attainment rather than grades:

> You can definitely use grades as a measure…and grades do mean something. I also think that a level for them of achievement is how supported do they feel? Are they really able to connect at some level to adults? Because let's not forget they are in

foster care because they've been abandoned by the people who initially in this world should have taken care of them.

Foster parents articulated that they ask the foster children in their care to do their best. Faith stated that their goals had to be realistic and specific for each child. "They are not going to get 95s in math. If they get a 65 in math, we might throw a party…because that is the best that they can do."

A participant expressed that many of the foster children do not reach the goal of obtaining a high school diploma or a GED. School official 2 expressed: "I feel it's inevitable because you have so many foster children that when they were young, they were left behind and that's a major, major trauma."

Cassandra also explained how the impact of early obstacles affects older school-age foster students. She recounts a story of two girls she worked with who were 16 and 17 years old and did not know how to read. "At that point, it's such an uphill battle that sometimes you pick and choose what you expect."

Many students in foster care will age out of the foster care system at age 18 without obtaining a high school diploma. Catherine reported that she would like to see foster students graduate from high school and maybe attend college, but "a lot of times children age out at 18 and they don't want to stay in care."

The participants communicated to the researcher that many people have a set opinion of students in foster care. As stated by Fiona: "I think if you ask the general population, if they were being honest, they would not expect as much from a foster kid academically as they would from a [non-foster] kid, and probably for a good reason." The

participants expressed the early trauma, gaps in their education due to mobility, and the lack of stability as reasons why they may have low expectations for foster children.

Catherine explained: "Their instability [is an obstacle]. Between visits with their birth parents, which judges require three and four and five times a week I've seen lately, and then if they have outside therapies and things like that, it's a lot of pressure on these kids to have all of that plus school." She went on to express that from what she has seen in her career as a caseworker she has learned to not expect too much from these students, who have so much in which to deal.

Motivation: While none of the participants report any negative bias toward the foster child in their care from school officials, they did note that sometimes school officials treat a foster child with extra care. Often the foster parents and caseworkers appreciated this extra care, but as Foster parent 1 expressed, it backfired for the child in her care. "The teachers get too emotionally involved, and then they started giving her too many passes and not holding her accountable." This led to a lack of effort on the student's part.

Many of the participants identified that the foster students in their care have low self-esteem that impacted their education and relationships with both peers and adults. School official 2 believes that the foster child has to have "the drive and motivation within themselves to change their lives around." This drive is hampered by the low self-esteem that many foster children experience. Raising the expectations that foster students have for themselves can increase their aspirations and engagement in the school setting. As explained by Cassandra: "When they've had such a long history of not going to school, not caring about school, then it's hard to change that in a child."

However, when the adults in their life help them see the possibilities, more can be expected. Sarah stated, "If they are going to go home and not get that support, it's all going to fall apart." All of the foster parents in this study agree that school has to be a priority that is reinforced. Faith expressed the importance of prioritizing education while building the foster child's self-esteem.

> Homework routines, nighttime routines, school routines. As soon as they walk in the door, wash hands, have a snack, get right on homework, so they have time to do any kind of sports afterward, or activities….I'd have to be on top of them and follow up with them, or they would kind of just do what they wanted. [They know education is valued] because we put a big importance on it…They get high-fives and hugs if they bring home a good grade.

During his interview, Frank pointed out photos on a wall of the many children he had fostered in his 30 years of experience. He shared with the researcher some of the successes and failures. He also stated, "I make a point of pointing the successes out to the kids. Here are the kids who stayed here long enough and who went on to accomplish things."

He shared with the researcher some of the specific successes, including many who were in stable relationships and successful careers, including assistant principals and police officers. He talked about how he found it a motivation for his current placements to show them the high school graduation pictures.

Some foster parents and school officials shared stories of academic success, which included graduating high school, attending college, and thriving in a stable career. On the other hand, some participants shared stories of children who dropped out of

school and many who aged out of foster care at 18. While it is difficult to identify one expectation to fit all children, especially foster children, the consensus of participants in this study was that expectations are individualized and realistic to each child in care.

Conclusion

The educational experiences of children in foster care are complex and multifaceted. Previous experiences and relationships add to the complexity. Adult stakeholders have the potential to impact the educational experiences of foster children. Bronfenbrenner proposed that the developing child is surrounded by layers of relationships. The interactions between these relationships impacts the academic achievement of students in foster care. When a foster child is fortunate enough to find supportive adults, stability, knowledgeable school officials, and effective caseworkers, their chances for academic success increase but is still not guaranteed.

CHAPTER 5

Discussion

Introduction

This phenomenological study explored the educational experiences of school-age foster children through the perspectives and expectations of multiple adult stakeholders. The present study provides a rich, contextualized understanding of adult stakeholders' perspectives and expectations of the educational experiences of school-age foster children. Ten participants took part in semi-structured interviews that were recorded and transcribed by the researcher. After the researcher reviewed and analyzed the data from the interviews, seven themes emerged that applied to the research questions. The themes include trauma, relationships, impactful people, established habits, communication, realistic expectations, and motivation.

1) How do adult stakeholders perceive the educational experience of foster children?

From the data that was collected from the participants two themes emerged addressing the first research question. These themes were trauma and relationships. All of the participants clearly expressed that school age foster children are often branded by trauma. The levels and amount of trauma that they experience can have an enormous impact on their educational experiences. While the participants understood the importance of education, all of the participants identified addressing the trauma that school age foster children experienced as being more important.

The participants also recognized the inability of school age foster children to develop and keep positive relationships with both peers and adults. Many of the

participants expressed that often the foster children are not trusting of adults and many

foster children tend to keep their foster status to themselves.

2) What do adult stakeholders believe contributes to or inhibits the academic progress
   of children in foster care?

From the data that was collected from the participants three themes emerged

addressing the second research question. These themes were impactful people,

established habits and communication. All of the participants stated that caring and

knowledgeable adults, who can advocate for the school age foster child, can contribute to

the educational success of foster children. While the participants felt that this adult can

be a school official or a caseworker, they specifically identified the foster parents who

have daily contact with the foster child as the most important individual in the pursuit of

educational success.

The established habits that the foster youth developed prior to entering the foster

system will have an impact on their education. The participants expressed that the older

the child is when they enter care, and the longer they are in care, the more they lack a

stable environment. This makes it more difficult to turn things around educationally.

Participants also expressed that communication between impactful people in the

life of school age foster children as a contributing factor to educational success, with a

lack of communication hindering success.

3) What educational expectations do adult stakeholders have for children in foster care?

From the data that was collected from the participants three themes emerged

addressing the second research question. These themes were realistic expectations and

motivation. The participants expressed that early trauma, gaps in their education,

mobility, and instability are reasons why they may have realistic expectations as adult stakeholders in the foster child's life. The participants also stated that the foster children must be motivated themselves to achieve academic success.

Implication of Findings and Relationships to Prior Research

The data from this study suggests that school-age children in foster care often come into care after experiencing a large degree of trauma. This experienced trauma is often the reason why they were removed from their birth parents and placed into the foster care system. All 10 participants in the study described some sort of trauma experienced by the foster children with whom they had contact.

Many school-age foster children enter care bearing scars of either past physical or mental trauma. According to Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shea (2006), "Youths in foster care who have experienced trauma, abuse and/or neglect often are disrupted from placement and schools frequently and often lack adequate and/or consistent nurturing, guidance, and support" (p. 165).

This trauma has a tremendous impact on the educational achievement of school age foster children. Abuse, neglect, and being placed into foster care have all been shown to be associated with poor educational achievement (Zetlin & Weinberg, 2013). Often for a school-age child in foster care, school is not the foremost concern of their day. As one of the school officials expressed, the school-age foster child often has other needs that need to be met before education can be addressed. These other needs can be as simple as food, safety, or a warm house to sleep in.

While one of the participants directly identified Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1967), all of the participants expressed the importance of meeting other needs prior to

the educational needs of school-age foster children. It is natural that adult stakeholders' immediate instinct is to meet the child's basic needs first. As Samantha explained, the basic needs of the child must be satisfied in order for that child to reach his or her full potential. All of the caseworkers interviewed in the study express that their first priority was not the education of the child, but to make sure the foster child was placed into a safe environment. That safe environment provides shelter, food, and security. The participants in this study appreciate the foster parents and the environment that the foster parents provide, but mentioned that not all foster homes are created equal; some are better than others.

The trauma that school-age foster children have often experienced is difficult to overcome; the longer a child is exposed to trauma, the bigger the challenge. Both the foster parents and the caseworkers in this study express that the age in which a child enters care can be an important factor in the child's educational achievement. This is supported in a study by Clemens, V., Klopfenstein, K., Lalonde, T., & Tis, M. (2018), which reported that for every year older a child is at the time of first removal and placement into foster care, academic growth falls by 0.64-0.84 percentile points.

When a child enters care at an older age, it is often difficult to learn new habits that lead to academic success. A caseworker expressed that it is difficult for foster children who come into care at 16 or 17 years of age as they have often fallen behind in their education, been exposed to bad habits, and have an uphill battle to succeed academically.

The school can provide the school-age foster child with the stability and support that they desperately need to overcome the previous trauma that has occurred in their

lives. All of the school officials report that their schools are filled with caring adults who want to help the foster child.

In a study that included interviews with 19 foster care alumni, the participants identified the school environment as a safe haven that allowed them to escape from the many stresses in other parts of their lives (Haas, Allenn, & Amoah, 2014). The school environment, especially participating in afterschool activities and other social events, has the ability to promote a sense of normalcy to a school-age foster child (Pokempner, et. al 2015). All of the foster parents and case workers in the study expressed that providing school-age foster children with the opportunity to partake in extracurricular activities, either through the school or in the community, was a top priority.

Research has demonstrated that participation in extracurricular activities is associated with higher reported grades and greater educational aspiration for high school-age foster children (White, Scott, & Munson, 2017). All of the foster parents in the present study expressed that the caseworkers would reimburse funds to help pay for these activities. To a school-age foster child, playing on a sports team or partaking in a social event may be the first step to feeling stability and normalcy in their lives—and that is a step closer to academic progress.

Involvement in extracurricular activities provides other benefits. The participants from this study agree that school-age foster children often have difficulties forming and maintaining positive relationships with both adults and peers. All of the school officials in the study report that many of the school-age foster children that they have worked with tended to be shy and not very open to forming relationships with school staff. This is understandable considering the trauma that they may have experienced; many foster

children are unwilling to form new relationships with adults because they fear that the new relationship will be disrupted like many of their previous relationships.

The participants felt it was important to continue to promote positive adult relationships for school-age foster students through school activities. This is reinforced in a study by Stroling-Goltzman, Woodhouse, Suter, & Werrbach (2016), in which foster youth reported that a stable and positive adult relationship was the most important influence on their educational success. As two of the school officials expressed, if you keep trying and put in the effort, they will come around and trust.

As previously stated in the literature, for children in foster care, often the layers of relationships break down either in their early years or later in their school-age years. This breakdown often results in foster children developing into a vulnerable population in the school system. The presence of certain people in a foster child's life make a positive impact and become a driving force in repairing broken relationships.

Reestablishing those connections within Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model contributes to academic progress. In a study by Martin and Jackson (2002), 74% of former foster adults interviewed identified a caregiver who showed an active interest in their education and well-being as being of vital importance for their educational progress.

Unfortunately, many school officials may not have the time to work on developing a relationship with a school-age foster child as they often have large caseloads. As one school official reported, she has one social worker for 1,800 students in her school. The National Association of Social Workers recommends a ratio of one social worker for every 250 students (NYS Social Worker Survival Kit, 2014).

Caseworkers also have sometimes daunting conditions to deal with in terms of caseloads. As the caseworkers in this study report, they get very little time to spend with the children—sometimes only 30 minutes a month. In order to help school officials and caseworkers succeed at helping foster children in their care, it is necessary to provide them with more manageable caseloads.

School officials in this study are committed to helping the school-age foster children in their care to the best of their abilities. Another obstacle that prevents school officials from helping and developing relationships with school-age foster children is the lack of openness that many of these children have toward adults. School-age foster children often will hide their foster status from not only school officials, but also their peers. All of the participants in the study report that school-age foster children do not often share their status as foster children with their peers out of embarrassment or fear of being different.

Studies find that many foster children are uncomfortable admitting their foster status to their peers (Finkelstein et al., 2002). It is important that school-age foster children find a trusting person whom they feel comfortable with to discuss their feelings. Often that relationship will be with the foster parent, school official, teacher, coach, or even a peer. If successful, that relationship can sometimes remain even as the foster child moves on from care.

During the interviews, one of the foster parents discussed the continued relationships that he and his wife still have with many of their former foster children, who are now grown adults. People who can have a positive impact in a foster child's life are not limited to the foster parent. There is a dire need for caretakers, school officials,

caseworkers, and even community members to promote and preserve the social connections in the lives of foster youth (Foster Care Youth and Alumni, 2017).

However, school officials and caseworkers who serve the foster students in a professional manor often end their relationship with the foster child either when that child leaves the school system or ages out of care. Even if relationships end, the time spent developing the connections while in care is essential for promoting social capital. By developing social capital, foster students acquire the skills to repair and strengthen bonds with peers and adults in their lives. As recognized by participants in this study, this can be a contributing factor to academic progress.

Another factor which was identified by participants as affecting academic progress was the education habits of the student. These habits could be those established prior to being placed in care, as well as those developed during care. For this reason, the habits were identified as having both a positive and negative impact on academic progress, especially when the age of the child was considered.

Cassandra explained that older children often come into care with poor habits related to education. Often there is a low importance placed on school by birth parents, with little to no structure present in the daily routine. Fiona explained how this lack of structure and routine was not conducive to education. Students that come into care are not in the habit of doing homework, having an adult attend school meetings, or even having someone acknowledge academic achievements.

Previous studies have also found similar results. A 2006 study by Biddulph reported that 47% of children in foster care reported never being praised for doing well at school. School-age foster students surveyed by Osbourne, Alfano, & Winn (2010)

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reported a lack of support from caregivers in terms of encouraging attendance and a lack of help with homework as barriers to their academic achievement. The researcher found that all participants in this study placed a high value on establishing solid, positive habits and routines in order to encourage motivation and academic progress.

A final factor that was found to contribute to academic progress was communication between all adult stakeholders. The adult stakeholders in the study expressed that a team approach was needed to address the educational needs of the foster child. The consensus among participants was that academic progress is made more possible for a school-age foster child if there is at least one person advocating on their behalf. Some participants shared stories of caseworkers who played a more active role in advocating for the foster child, but this was not found to be the norm.

More often, it was the foster parent who was identified as having a bigger impact on helping to drive the student's progress. In the study, all of the foster parents expressed that they felt comfortable advocating for the foster children in their care. This comfort can be associated with the fact that all of the foster parents had biological children and had previous relationships with the school. All of the foster parents also expressed that they felt knowledgeable about the special educational needs of the foster children in their care and were involved in Committee on Special Education (CSE) and Individualized Educational Plans (IEP) meetings.

This contradicts the results of a qualitative study by Zetlin, Macleod, & Kimm (2012), in which both general and special education teachers were questioned about their experiences with school-age foster children. They reported that foster parents did not attend IEP meetings, often did not sign paperwork, or even understand the IEP process.

The school officials in the present study had mixed experiences with foster parents'
involvement at CSE meetings.

The efforts of state and federal governments to increase stability and improve
educational outcomes for youths in foster care contributes to better communication
between adult stakeholders. The Uninterrupted Scholars Act (2013) and Every Student
Succeeds Act (2015) have both moved to call for the improvement of communication and
a greater efficiency of data sharing between child welfare agencies and schools.

On a more local level, county agencies in Pennsylvania have also established
programs to facilitate data sharing, allowing for easier access to educational records
between caseworkers and the school system (National Factsheet on the Educational
Outcomes of Children in Foster Care, 2018).

The cooperation of all adult stakeholders being invested in the educational
development of the school-age foster child fits nicely with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological
Systems Model (1979). The interaction between the foster parents, the school, the
caseworker, the biological parents, and the judges in the legal system are what
Bronfenbrenner would explain as the microsystem and mesosystem working together to
impact the developing foster child's education.

However, for many school-age children in foster care, this microsystem and
mesosystem often breaks down. A study by Zetlin, Weinburg, & Shea (2010)
demonstrates the breakdown of the microsystem that so often impacts the school-age
foster child. The qualitative study using focus groups of caregivers, school officials, and
child welfare agents reports that when foster children experienced difficulties in school,

each group of adult stakeholders, including the foster parents, caseworkers, and school officials, failed to collaborate and share views on what was needed.

Each of the groups identified the other groups as having to play a larger role in the education of the foster child. As one of the participants in the study asserted, "I feel like everybody needs to take responsibility for these kids and really honor that they belong to all of us" (p. 252). In this way, not only is communication among adult stakeholders necessary to maintain the relationships between Bronfenbrenner's layers of relationships, but so is ownership of responsibility.

With a breakdown in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory comes a change in the expectations that participants in the study have for the education of children in foster care. The consensus of participants is that expectations must remain realistic. Is it realistic to expect a 17-year-old who has not learned to read yet to graduate from high school after suffering trauma, lacking relationships with caring role models, and being moved into multiple foster homes and schools? Cassandra explains that with an uphill battle like that, you have to "pick and choose what you expect."

As with any child, the foster parents in this study share that they ask their foster children to just do their best. One shared a story of giving high-fives for a 65 in math because they knew how hard the student worked to get that grade. A few participants express that although students may not earn grades traditionally thought of as being successful, the expectation on the adult's part is for the foster student to connect with others and feel supported in an educational setting.

With the lack of positive school habits, the history of trauma, and the lack of positive influences that foster children often come into care with, it is difficult for the

students themselves to have the motivation to achieve. While a study by Piel (2018) showed that 70% of youth in foster care aspire to continue their education at the postsecondary level, only 39% enroll in institutions, with only 10% actually graduating with a degree by the age of 25. Sometimes the drive is there, but the student and caring adult stakeholders have to fight harder to maintain that level. The participants shared the importance of developing self-esteem and trying to encourage motivation within the school-age foster students.

A study by Osbourne, Alfano, & Winn (2010) interviewed 80 students in foster care and found that nearly 25% felt that their educational progress was below average. Adult stakeholders have the ability to influence the self-esteem of the foster child. It is also often the focus of programs such as the Take Charge Program in Oregon, to help students in goal-setting and increasing motivation.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory can again be used to examine the development of school-age foster children. While much emphasis is placed on the connections between systems, it is important to remember the individual who is center to the layers of relationships. Encouraging the development of intrinsic motivation and effort is an important step in maintaining a well-functioning ecological system.

Limitations

There were several limitations to the present study. The small sample size used in the study consisted of 10 participants, which included three foster parents, three caseworkers, and four school officials. Of the 10 participants in the study, eight of them were female and only two of them were males. The fact that only two males took part in the study limits the male perspective.

All of the foster parents in the study live in a suburban neighborhood with the children in their care attending suburban schools. All of the foster parents had many years of experience with school-age children. All three foster parents had biological children of their own, which gave them experience with dealing with educational issues and comfort with the school system. Two of the foster parents either work or had previously worked in a school district. The familiarity that these foster parents have with the school system may be a factor that shaped their experiences with the school and school officials.

The school officials in the study also all work in suburban schools. There were no urban schools used in the study. School officials in urban settings may have a different experience with foster children and the foster parents.

The three caseworkers in the study came from two different suburban counties as well. Since the present study used convenience sampling, the findings may not be representative of all adult stakeholders who may be involved in the education of school-age foster children.

In this study, the researcher was the person who conducted the interviews with the participants, gathered the data, and coded the data. There was no co-researcher with which to corroborate. The researcher is a foster parent himself and during the study attempted to put aside his past experiences, bias, and prejudices. The researcher shared with the participants of the study that he was a foster parent. The sharing of this information could have influenced the participants' answers during the interviews.

This study only used interviews with adult stakeholders to collect data. The researcher chose to collect data using a single method (i.e., interviews) from multiple

sources (i.e., adult stakeholders). The inclusion of other methods of data collection, such as observations, would add validity to the study through data triangulation.

Recommendations for Future Studies

It is recommended that future studies use a larger and more diverse sample of participants. A replication of this study should include a larger sample size that includes diverse adult stakeholders from various economic, geographical, and racial backgrounds to explore the perspectives that these adult stakeholders have toward the educational experience of school-age foster children.

The present study included the experiences of foster parents, school officials, and caseworkers. A future study may also consider including former foster care students who have personal experiences to share with the researcher. The use of school-age foster children in a study can be problematic due to the age and difficulty obtaining permissions to interview school-age foster children, but an interview with former foster children could provide insight into the perspectives and experiences of foster children.

The researcher has plans to conduct a future study using a case study method that explores the educational experiences of one or two specific school-age foster children. The case study will include the adult stakeholders who are involved in the specific school-age foster child's education. This type of study will provide specific data involving a school-age foster child in order to offer a more complete picture of the levels of relationships within a foster child's educational experience.

During the current study, the researcher discovered that the educational experience of school-age foster students as perceived by adult stakeholders varied depending on the age of the foster child. A future study may wish to examine school-age

foster children of a certain age (e.g., high school, middle school, and/or elementary school). This will provide more specific data in line with the age of the school-age foster student.

Recommendations for Future Practice

As stated by participants in the present study and in the review of the literature, school-age foster students are a vulnerable population. Many of the foster students in school today have experienced trauma that impact their educational achievement. It is important that school-age foster students have caring and supportive adults who communicate to address their educational needs.

Data from this study identified trauma as a significant barrier to educational success for students in foster care. It is recommended that members of the school staff shift the way they interpret the behaviors of school-age foster children. Often school-age foster children are labeled as disruptive students. It is important for school staff to understand that many of these negative behaviors are the consequences of the trauma the foster child experience. Becoming a school that is trauma-informed requires a shift from asking "what's wrong with you?' to asking, "What happened to you?" (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2015). When school staff shifts their approach to take into account the effect that trauma has on the foster child, then they will start to take responsibility not only for the education of foster children, but also for their overall well-being.

A program where school officials and child welfare agents combine to provide training for both foster parents and educators on how to support school-age foster children is recommended. The child welfare agents can educate both the school officials and foster parents about the unique circumstances that surround school-age foster

children. The school officials, especially the school psychologist or school social workers, can instruct the foster parents on the best practices that will support the educational achievement of school-age foster children and provide training to foster parents in effective behavior strategies (Palmieri & La Salle, 2017).

It is important that school-age foster children feel comfortable in the school setting. The present study finds that many students in foster care are not forthcoming to peers and school officials about their status as a foster child. School-age foster children need to feel that their situation is understood. By introducing curriculum that highlights foster students and makes their situation more available to be understood by peers, school-age foster students may feel more comfortable opening up about their experiences.

School-age foster students are a very mobile population. According to the National Working Group of Foster Care and Education, 34% of school-age foster students experience five or more school changes before either graduating or leaving care (Research Highlights on Educational and Foster Care, 2014). Even though caseworkers in the present study stated that they attempt to keep foster care students in their home school whenever possible, studies indicate that is not often the reality (Pears, Kim, Buchanan, & Fisher, 2015).

A recruitment of foster parents from within the educational system could provide Child Protective Services with the opportunity to have a bank of foster parents within various school districts. This would not only help keep students in their home district, but would provide foster parents who are familiar and comfortable with the educational system. Having more foster homes in various communities may allow the school-age

foster child the ability to either stay in their original school, or at least complete the academic year in their original school.

All of the participants in the present study expressed the desire to allow school-age foster students the ability to participate in extracurricular activities. Studies find that participation in extracurricular activities promotes a sense of normalcy for school-age foster children (Pokempner, Mordecai, Rosado, & Subrahmanyam, 2015).

School-age foster children are often not permitted to participate in extracurricular activities due to certain school policies that do not allow students with poor grades to participate in extracurricular activities. It is recommended that schools evaluate their policies toward using grade point averages to determine participation in certain activities.

Teacher education programs should instruct teacher candidates about the backgrounds and needs of students in foster care. Inviting adults from various organizations with knowledge of the foster care system to share their experiences with teacher candidates provides a better understanding of the backgrounds and needs of school-age foster children. Having preservice teachers conduct research as part of their training increases their knowledge about school-age foster children and evidence-based practices to support students in foster care (Parker & Folkman, 2015).

As this study and previous studies reveal, school-age foster children need the support and attention of multiple adult stakeholders. The researcher hopes that the suggestions and themes that emerge from this study will be used by the adult stakeholders to improve the educational achievement of school-age foster children.

Conclusion

Throughout this study it became evident that children in foster care experience trauma that is difficult to overcome. While safety and health are of utmost importance, education often becomes a secondary issue. Often by the time a foster child is finally in a stable environment, it is more difficult to address their educational needs—which have long been neglected.

Adult stakeholders have the ability to impact the educational experiences—and more importantly the future—of youth in foster care. In order for this to happen, a partnership must develop between all of the adult stakeholders who have contact with the foster youth. It is imperative that they have the knowledge and ability to communicate with each other to support the educational achievement of the school-age foster child.

As a society, we have to understand that our children, especially foster children, are the responsibility of adults. The "village" must establish reasonable expectations on foster children, but it also has to demand that adults nurture and support this vulnerable population—physically, emotionally, and as this study shows, academically.

Appendix A: IRB Approval

ST. JOHN'S UNIVERSITY

Federal Wide Assurance: FWA00009066

Nov 25, 2019 3:56 PM EST

Kevin Kowalczyk
Ed Admin & Instruc Leadership

Re: Expedited Review - Initial - **IRB-FY2020-256** *EXAMINING THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE OF FOSTER CHILDREN THROUGH THE PERSPECTIVE AND EXPECTATIONS OF MULTIPLE ADULT STAKEHOLDERS*

Dear Kevin Kowalczyk:

The St John's University Institutional Review Board has rendered the decision below for *EXAMINING THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE OF FOSTER CHILDREN THROUGH THE PERSPECTIVE AND EXPECTATIONS OF MULTIPLE ADULT STAKEHOLDERS*. The approval is effective from November 25, 2019 through November 24, 2020

Decision: Approved

PLEASE NOTE: If you have collected any data prior to this approval date, the data needs to be discarded.

Selected Category: 7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Sincerely,

Raymond DiGiuseppe, PhD, ABPP
Chair, Institutional Review Board
Professor of Psychology

Marie Nitopi, Ed.D.
IRB Coordinator

ST. JOHN'S
UNIVERSITY
8000 UTOPIA PARKWAY, QUEENS, NY 11439

Dear Participant,

My name is Kevin Kowalczyk and I am a doctoral candidate at St. John's University. I am working on my dissertation which involves a research study entitled Examining the Educational Experience of Foster Children Through the Perspective and Expectations of Multiple Adult Stakeholders. The purpose of the research is to explore the educational experience of students in foster care through the perspective and expectations of multiple stakeholders.

If you agree to be in this study, you will be interviewed about your experiences and expectations of students in foster care. The one time 45-minute interview, held at a convenient location, will be audio-taped and may be reviewed by you at the conclusion of the interview. If so desired, you may request that all, or any portion of the tape, be destroyed. There are no reasonably foreseeable risks or discomforts associated with the collection of this data. Although you will receive no direct benefits, this research may help explore the educational experiences of students in foster care.

By choosing to be interviewed, you are agreeing to be part of the study. However, no identifiable factors will be collected. Your responses will be kept confidential and all participants and subjects discussed will be given pseudonyms. The collected data will be in a secure location and held until the end of my dissertation and/ or when my advisor suggests information to be terminated.

Participation is voluntary. You have the right to skip or choose to not answer any questions you prefer not to answer. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty and you may discontinue participation at any time. If you have any questions regarding the research or your rights as a participant, please contact me, Kevin Kowalczyk (631) 521-6703, or my mentor, Dr. Mary Ellen Freeley (718) 990-5537, at St. John's University. If you agree to participate please sign below. You will receive a copy of this consent letter to keep.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Kevin Kowalczyk
_____
_____

<u>Agreement to Participate</u>

_____
_____

                          Subject's Signature
Date

Appendix C: Interview Questions for Foster Parents

1) How long have you been a certified foster parent?

2) What were your motives to become a certified foster parent?

3) Do you feel you are adequately trained and supported to meet the specific educational needs for foster children in your care? How has the caseworker played a role in the educational support you have or have not received?

4) How has the school supported you in meeting the educational needs of the foster children in your care?

5) What is your view on notifying teachers of the foster status of the child in your care?

6) Has the school (teacher, administration, school social worker) ever provided you with ideas or strategies to assist you in meeting the needs of the foster students in your care?

7) How often are you in contact with the foster child's school?

8) Can you describe the process of enrolling the foster child into a new school?

9) Do the foster children in your care have the ability to participate in extracurricular activities?

10) How do you communicate the importance of education to the foster child in your care?

11) Can you describe the educational expectations that you have for foster children in your care?

12) How do you define educational success for foster children in your care?

13) Have you had any experiences with the biological parents being involved in the foster youth's education?

14) Review of the literature has shown that foster children are overrepresented in special education. What is your experience with addressing the special educational needs of foster children in your care?

15) Do you feel comfortable to advocate for the educational needs of the foster children in your care?

16) Who do you think is the most important person in a foster child's life to help him/her achieve their educational goals?

Appendix D: Interview Questions for Caseworkers/County Officials

1) What is your involvement in the educational experiences of students in care?

2) What educational expectations do you have for children in foster care?

3) Research has shown that students in foster care are a highly mobile population with many school changes. Based on your experiences, how do you feel this has impacted their educational achievement?

4) Do you believe that school officials and foster parents have the adequate skills, knowledge, and training to help students in foster care achieve academic success?

5) How often are you in contact with school officials regarding the academic achievement of students in foster care? (issues with enrolling students, transfer of records, health records)

6) What obstacles do you feel prevent school age foster children from achieving academic success?

7) How do you define educational success for children in foster care? What do you feel contributes to foster children who do have educational success?

8) How do you communicate the importance of education to a school-aged child in foster care?

9) As a caseworker you interact with both the foster parents and the biological parents of foster children. In your experiences what role have you seen them play in the educational experience of the school age foster child?

10) Who do you think is the most important person in a foster child's life to help him/her achieve their educational goals?

Appendix E: Interview Questions for School Officials

1) Do you feel you are adequately trained and supported to meet the specific educational needs for students in foster care?

2) How are you made aware of a foster student's status? (teachers)

3) How do you communicate to a teacher that a student is in foster care? (Guidance counselor)

4) How would you describe the foster parent's involvement in supporting the educational achievement of foster children?

5) How do you define educational success for children in foster care? What do you feel contributes to foster children who do have educational success?

6) A review of the literature has shown that foster students are overrepresented in special education when compared with their non foster peers. What's your experience with addressing the special educational needs of children in foster care?

7) What experiences have you had regarding discipline issues with students in foster care? How does this differ from non-foster children?

8) Have you noticed any bias toward a child in foster care from any staff members in your school?

9) How do you describe the foster student's relationships with other students and staff members?

10) As a school official how often do you have contact with the foster child's case worker?

11) Who do you think is the most important person in a foster child's life to help

him/her achieve their educational goals?

Appendix F: Coding Chart

Theme	Descriptive/In vivo	Examples from interviews
Trauma	Exposure to drugs Abuse Basic needs not meet Lack of safety Low income Troubled "horrific situations" "more stressors than anybody else" Highly mobile population Confused	"They have way more stressors than anybody else, and most people don't understand that…They have much more going on."
Relationships	Bonds "Guarded, shielded" Solitary "Connections with adults limited" Minimal biological parent relationship Extracurricular activates Untrusting "This person can leave me" "Instability"	"You have to work very, very, very, very hard to win their trust, but when you win their trust, then they will seek you out."
Impactful People	Child-parent relationship Advocate Committed Understanding Necessary "completely invested" Team (Village) "Good and bad" "Cooperative partnership" "Trusting adults"	"The foster parents, absolutely. The person that they have daily dealings with. And the second to that would be teachers, or any faculty member that they put their trust in. But the foster parents provide structure, providing time to do homework, provide a safe environment at home, comfortable environment at home. I think nothing seconds that."
Established Habits	Age of child No structure Routines Values "Missing school"	"They've had such a long history of not going to school, not caring about school, that hard to change"

Communication	Advocate "Cooperative partnership" Relationship with the school Seek out adults	"The child has to be engaged, the case worker has to be engaged, the foster parent, and the biological parents have to all be on the same page…The hardest part is getting everybody on the same page."
Realistic Expectation	"that's your best" "Can't turn back time" Social capital Graduate high school "up hill battle"	"If you ask the general population…they would not expect as much from a foster kid academically…and probably for a good reason"
Motivation	"Drive with in them" Self-esteem Involvement	"The drive and motivation that they had within them themselves to conquer and to turn their lives around"

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Vita

Name	*Kevin Kowalczyk*
High School	*New Hyde Park Memorial High School*
Date of Graduation	*June 1993*
Baccalaureate Degree	*Bachelor of Arts, LI University, Brookville, NY* *Major: Social Studies Secondary Education*
Date Graduated	*May 1997*
Other Degrees and Certificates	*Master of Science, Hofstra University, Hempstead, NY* *Major: Special Education*
Date Graduated	*August 2000*