TEACHERS’ EXPERIENCES WITH STUDENTS WHO LIVE IN FOSTER CARE

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TEACHERS’ EXPERIENCES WITH STUDENTS WHO LIVE IN FOSTER CARE

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ABSTRACT

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Children who live in foster care are an educationally vulnerable population. They often experience academic challenges, emotional instability, and behavioral difficulties. Classroom teachers who instruct these children often feel under-informed and unsupported in serving the needs of foster students. The present study examined how teachers are informed of a student’s foster care status, the supports and services available to teachers in working with children, and the supports and services teachers feel they need in order to provide an appropriate education to this population. Ten teachers were interviewed to gain insight into their experiences educating foster children. Results indicated there is inconsistency in how teachers are informed of a child’s foster care status and that teachers are dissatisfied with the lack of background information provided regarding a child’s foster care status. Participants reported feeling supported by the school when designing and implementing behavioral interventions, however many expressed a need for more collaboration among the school, home, and social service agency. Suggestions are made for school systems and social service agencies to provide
more information, training, and collaboration to teachers of students who live in foster care.
I dedicate this thesis to my mom and dad, Anthony, Scott, and Elizabeth, innumerable friends, and Peter. Without all of your love and encouragement I would not be where I am today. Thank you.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

More than 400,000 children live in foster placements in the United States (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2010). These children are removed from their parents’ custody by the court system for numerous reasons including physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional or psychological abuse, and neglect. Foster placements also stem from extenuating circumstances that limit the parents’ ability to adequately care for their children such as incarceration, illness or death, and delinquency (Scherr, 2007). Most children in the foster care system have experienced some type of physical or emotional trauma. This includes prenatal exposure to alcohol, tobacco and other drugs; physical and emotional abuse and neglect; violence in their home and community; estrangement from their biological families; and frequent moves between foster homes (Vacca, 2008).

Of the 408,425 children currently in the foster care system, 70% are school-age (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2010). The median age of children in foster care is 9.2 and the majority of these children are members of racial or ethnic minorities. Most children remain in foster care for over a year, with a median stay of 14 months and a mean stay of 25.3 months; however, most do not remain in the first home in which they were placed. Studies have shown foster children living in an average of five or more different homes (Zima, Bussing, Freeman, Yang, Belin, & Forness, 2000). Of
particular concern is that these children are often from urban neighborhoods and continue to live in foster homes that are in urban neighborhoods, where the academic quality and available resources are lacking (Smithgall, Gladden, Howard, Goerge, & Courtney, 2004). Urban schools generally have less experienced teachers, larger class sizes, less instructional space per pupil, and less funding to put towards instructional materials (Jimenz-Castellanos, 2010). It is important for teachers—especially those in urban school districts—to be adequately prepared and supported in their efforts to serve students who live in foster care. Recommendations exist as to how best students in foster care can be supported by the school, but little research has examined how schools are implementing these recommendations (McKellar & Cowan, 2011).
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this literature review is to examine the challenges affecting the school functioning of children who live in the foster care system. Additionally, it will synthesize previous research examining children and adolescents who live in foster care and teachers’ perceptions of and experiences with students who live in foster care. This information is valuable given that school systems must know their population well in order to achieve positive outcomes. The literature review begins with a discussion of the particular challenges that foster children often face, including emotional and behavioral problems, as well as educational issues. It then segues into how students who live in foster care are served in the education system and finally teachers’ perceptions of the challenges in educating a student who lives in foster care.

Challenges for Foster Children

Research regarding children who live in foster care often describes grim outcomes. Most studies identify a history of maltreatment and/or trauma, poor emotional functioning, and high-risk life styles. Detailed below are the emotional, behavioral, and educational challenges that many youth in foster care face.
Emotional problems. Maltreatment, including physical/emotional abuse and neglect, is the leading cause for removal from one’s biological parents (Scherr, 2010). Other reasons for removal include extenuating circumstances that limit the parents’ ability to adequately care for their children such as incarceration, illness or death (Scherr, 2007). Such circumstances can leave children traumatized, lacking a caregiver with whom to form attachment, and various other socio-emotional problems stemming from the uncertainty of their situation (Jee, Conn, Szilagyi, Blumkin, Baldwin, & Szilagyi, 2010). Traumatic situations that occurred in the biological home such as witnessing violence, physical and sexual abuse, and death of a parent can contribute to fearfulness and anxiety that may manifest in symptoms such as increased startle reflex to loud or unusual noises, clinging to caregivers, heightened arousal, guilt, withdrawal, and difficulty concentrating. Such symptoms are aligned with the DSM-5 diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD; American Psychological Association, 2013; Landsverk, Burns, Stambaugh & Reutz, 2006). Frequent and sudden moves in foster home placement can also be traumatic for children and contribute to feelings of lack of control over their lives, which may lead to withdrawal from relationships and society (Scherr, 2010). Upwards of 60% of children who experience a traumatic event develop PTSD; however, they may go unidentified and therefore never receive treatment (Kerig & Wenar, 2006). PTSD may cause a child to persistently re-experience the event through flashbacks and dreams, avoid situations associated with the event, and have heightened emotional arousal. The aforementioned symptoms associated with PTSD can be debilitating for a child (Kerig & Wenar, 2006).
A study of young children ages six months to five and a half years who were living in foster care examined social-emotional problems as rated by foster care parents on the Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ) and the Ages and States Questionnaire: Social Emotional (ASQ-SE; Bricker & Squires, 1999; Squires, Bricker, & Twombly, 2002). Results of this study indicated that 24% of the children displayed symptoms that placed them in the at-risk range for social-emotional and behavioral delays. They also found that the prevalence of social-emotional problems increased with age; preschool-age foster children were three times more likely to be identified with a social-emotional problem. These results clearly indicate that young children in foster care are emotionally vulnerable (Jee et al., 2010). Another study of children aged 5 to 18 conducted in a school by Bernedo, Salas, Garcia-Martin, and Fuentes (2012) found that children who were physically and/or emotionally abused exhibit more internalizing behaviors; such as depression, than children who were neglected. Earlier research also found that children who are maltreated are three to five times more likely to suffer from depression (Dube et al., 2001).

Typically, children who are removed from the homes of their biological parents and placed into foster care do not immediately forget about their parents or other family members. Exceptions to this would be infants and very young children who are not yet developmentally capable of storing this type of memory (Tustin & Hayne, 2010). Most children, though they may be separated from parents or siblings, will likely still feel a part of their biological family and thus experience internal conflicts over loyalty (Lee & Whiting, 2007). Alternatively, a child may have visitation with biological family
members during which they are aware of the physical presence of biological family members, but feel as if those members are not psychologically present because they are not offering the love, nurture, or protection, that the child naturally craves (Lee & Whiting, 2007). For example, a biological parent may be disengaged during visitation because of drug abuse that affects their psychological state, or they may be preoccupied with financial woes. These experiences of ambiguous loss may cause deep feelings of grief, an inability to move on, confusion, distress, uncertainty, outrage, immobilization, denial, guilt, and/or helplessness (Lee & Whiting, 2007). While foster care placement is an intervention that always occurs with the child’s best interest in mind, separation from the primary caregiver may cause attachment issues that can lead to lasting psychological issues (Golden, 2011). Children under the age of five who have experienced what the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th ed.; DSM-5)* refers to as “a pattern of extremes of insufficient care”—a persistent lack of having basic emotional needs for comfort, stimulation, and affection met by caring adults; repeated changes of primary caregivers that limit opportunities to form stable attachments; or rearing in unusual settings that severely limit opportunities to form selective attachments—are at risk for developing reactive attachment disorder (RAD; APA, 2013). Children with RAD are characterized by a failure to relate socially, either by exhibiting notable behavior inhibition or indiscriminate social behavior. For instance, a child with RAD may resist comfort and affection from caring adults or display excessively friendly behavior with perfect strangers (Golden, 2011). It is notable that RAD is considered a rare disorder and is difficult to diagnose, as the *DSM-5* requires that symptoms must have been displayed
by the age of five, and typically data regarding this time of a child’s life are not readily available. Therefore, children who display symptoms of RAD are often misdiagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), oppositional defiance disorder (ODD), borderline personality disorder, or antisocial personality disorder (Zilberstein, 2006). One study that looked at attachment issues in low-income, underprivileged youth living with their biological families and children living in foster care found that those children living in foster care had significantly higher symptom scores for RAD and 60% of the foster care population had evidence of mental health issues including conduct problems, emotional problems, hyperactivity, and problems with peer relationships (Minnis, Everret, Pelosi, Knapp, 2006).

**Behavioral problems.** Children who live in foster care are more likely than other youth to have behavioral problems at home and at school (Scherr, 2010). These youth exhibit externalizing behaviors such as aggression, defiance, and hyperactivity that often lead to discipline referrals at a rate approximately three times that of their peers (Sheer, 2007). Maltreatment, which the majority of these children have experienced, can lead to deficits in neurological self-regulatory systems and social competence (Fisher, Gunnar, Dozier, Bruce, & Pears, 2006). These deficits likely have a compounding effect that may result in difficulties inhibiting impulses and peer rejection (Pears, Fisher, Bronz, 2007).

**Behavior disorders.** A study looked at the behavioral characteristics of youth in foster care as reported on the *Behavior Assessment System for Children (BASC;* Reynolds & Kempaas, 1992) for 32 children between the ages of 6 and 12 years (Llario, Ceccato, Mañes, & Arnal, 2013). Foster parents and teachers completed the parent and teacher
rating forms, respectively. Results showed that both parties rated students in the clinically significant range on attention problems. Parents also rated children in the clinically significant range on externalizing problems, behavior problems, and adaptive skills (Llario et al., 2013). The findings regarding attention are particularly meaningful considering that teachers have the ability to compare foster children to other classmates and may have a more realistic view of attention span expectations.

Smucker and Kauffman (1996) examined problem behaviors exhibited at school by foster children aged 5 to 18 who were identified as having an emotional and behavioral disorder (EBD). Their results indicated that these children exhibited problem behaviors such as lying, stealing, defiance, attention problems, and poor social skills at a higher rate than other children who were identified with EBD, but were living at home with their biological parents. Similarly, Leslie, Gordon, Lambros, Premii, Peoples, and Gist (2005) found that preschool children in foster care are nearly seven times more likely to be diagnosed with behavioral disorders than children not in foster care. The uniquely unstable situation that foster children are faced with may make them exceedingly more likely to display negative behaviors. Unfortunately, these negative behaviors often lead to discipline referrals that increase the likelihood of foster home placement change, school suspension and expulsion, grade retention, and, eventually, school dropout (Sullivan, Jones, & Mathiesen, 2010; Scherr, 2010).

**High-risk behavior.** As a result of experiencing maltreatment, instability, and internalizing issues, foster youth have a higher probability of participating in risky behaviors such as running away, substance use, and sexual activity (Smith Dana, 2004;
Smith, Leve, & Chamberlain, 2006). In 2011 a researcher examined data from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS), which is a federally mandated data collection system intended to supply information on all children in foster care. Analysis revealed that approximately 2%, or 8,000 of the 385,000 children in foster care ran away. Risk factors associated with running away were examined and indicated that children with behavior problems, a diagnosed disability, or who were older, female, or African American tended to be more likely to run away from a foster placement. Additionally, children who ran away tended to be older at the time of the first removal from their biological parent(s), were removed from single-parent families, and/or had experienced more placement changes in a shorter duration than other foster children who did not run away (Lin, 2012).

Substance abuse and risky sexual behaviors, particularly in foster youth, function as coping mechanisms in response to traumatic past events and unstable future lives. Additionally, unhealthy behaviors are more common within this population due to lack of parental guidance and protective factors such as community and school involvement (McKellar & Cowan, 2011). Gramkowski and colleagues (2009) evaluated health related behaviors in a sample of 56 foster youth between the ages of 11 and 17 and compared results with a normative sample of youth not in foster care. Findings revealed that those in foster care demonstrated an increased level of health risk taking behavior, which increased when a child was living in a group home, had experienced the death of a parent, had a history of emotional or physical abuse, or had attempted suicide. Somewhat expected, but still encouraging, was that the younger an adolescent was, the less risky his
or her behavior. The most statistically significant finding in this study was the difference in the sexual behavior of youth in foster care and the typical population. Youth in foster care reported a higher prevalence of sexual activity, earlier age of sexual debut, and more sexual partners (Gramkowski et al., 2009).

Research regarding substance use in foster youth is sparse and, at times, conflicting. A meta-analysis of research regarding substance use among children living in foster care revealed that these individuals do not use alcohol and marijuana more frequently than their same aged peers. However, they do use “hard drugs” such as opiates, amphetamines, crack/cocaine, and hallucinogens at a substantially higher rate than their same age peers (Braciszewski & Stout, 2012). This is particularly concerning considering the higher chances of dependence, injury, and death associated with the use of such drugs. Other studies suggest a high number--as much as 40%--reporting daily use of alcohol and marijuana among adolescents living in foster care (Smith, Chamberlain, & Eddy, 2010; Vaughn, Ollie, McMillen, Scott, & Munson, 2007).

**Educational issues.** Children in foster care are one of the most educationally vulnerable populations (Zetlin & Weinberg, 2013). Research has shown that these students are often from disadvantaged neighborhoods with schools that lack adequate resources (Palladino, 2006; Smithgall et al., 2004). For instance, urban schools generally have less experienced teachers, larger class sizes, less instructional space per pupil, and less funding for instructional materials (Jimenz-Castellanos, 2010). Concurrently, numerous studies report that students who live in foster care demonstrate lower academic
Academics. One such study examined the IQs and basic reading, math, and writing skills of students living in foster care and found that most had low-average to average abilities in these areas. Additionally, those individuals with above average achievement when they first entered foster care demonstrated declines in achievement if and when they entered the foster care system for a second time (Evans, 2004). In another study, the pre-reading skills of 63 foster children slated to begin kindergarten were examined and close to 50% showed risk for later reading difficulties (Pears et al., 2011). This is particularly troubling considering that pre-reading skills such as phonological and phonemic awareness, alphabetic understanding, and oral language ability are one of the strongest predictors of future reading skills (Missall et al., 2007). Moreover, a significant number of children enter the foster care system prior to school age and it is likely that deficits in pre-reading skills compound to create greater educational deficits as the child continues in his or her school career. This was further substantiated in a study that revealed that second graders in foster care placements were at increased risk for poor performance on tests of literacy and science (Fantuzzo & Perlman, 2007).

Environmental factors. Foster students are at further disadvantage educationally because of transiency, school mobility (changing schools for reasons other than grade promotion), and non-involved or overwhelmed caregivers. Most foster children do not remain in the first foster home in which they were placed. Studies have shown foster children living in an average of five or more different homes (Zima et al., 2000). In 2010,
the national average number of placement changes was 3.1 (Casey Family Programs, 2011). As previously stated, transiency alone contributes to emotional and behavioral problems that affect students’ performance at school. These educational problems are exacerbated when placement changes involve changing schools as well. On average, students lose four months of progress every time they switch schools (Chambers & Palmer, 2010). This results from having to acclimate to a new school environment, missing instruction, repeating already learned instruction, delays in transfer of their records, and delays in provision of special services (Scherr, 2007; Stone, 2006). Non-involved and overwhelmed caregivers present additional problems for foster children. Research shows that caregiver involvement at school (i.e., communicating with teachers, helping with homework) can be a mediating factor for foster youth (Noonan et al, 2012; Palladino, 2006). However, social service workers and school personnel typically express discontent with the level of foster home and school collaboration (Ferguson & Wolkow, 2012; Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2010).

A meta-analysis of special education, retention, and discipline rates conducted by Scherr (2007) found 31% of youth in foster care were eligible for special education, 33% were retained or held back at least once in school, and 24% were suspended or expelled from school at least once. These findings are alarming in comparison to the national average of 14% of students identified with special needs, 11% retained or held back, 22% suspended, and 3% expelled, (National Association of School Psychologists, 2003; National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). Unsurprisingly, most suspensions and expulsions stem from infractions related to defiant and aggressive behaviors. School
retention is typically a result of academic underachievement and/or high absenteeism. In a sample of 302 foster youth, the average number of days missed from school in a year was five, but ranged as high as eighty-three. Thirteen percent of the same sample had repeated a grade, and of those, 16% had been retained more than one time (Zima et al., 2000). This is unfortunate because there is no evidence that grade retention is an effective intervention for academic problems, but rather that it may be harmful for a child’s self-image and is correlated with school drop-out (National Association of School Psychologists, 2003).

**School-based Services for Foster Children**

With the likelihood of extensive emotional and behavioral problems and educational obstacles, it is no easy task for schools to meet the needs of children who live in foster care. It is suggested that school-based interventions involve collaboration among stakeholders (child welfare, school, and home), and address internalizing and externalizing behaviors as well as academic deficits (Scherr, 2010). Teachers should be notified of a student’s foster care status so that they can collaborate with the appropriate stakeholders; however, this is not always the case. Studies report dissatisfaction among teachers regarding how they are notified of a child’s foster care status and with the lack of collaboration among home, school, and child welfare agencies (Palladino, 2006; Zetlin et al., 2010; Zetlin et al., 2012).

**Special education.** Schools frequently serve the unique needs of students in the foster care system through special education. As noted previously, at least 30% of children in foster care qualify for special education (Scherr, 2007). Many of these
children qualify because of emotional and behavioral disorders, while most others exhibit specific learning disabilities in the areas of reading, writing, and/or mathematics (Scheff, 2010; Smucker & Kaufman, 1996).

A study of 405 foster children in a district of 75,000 students found that nearly 20% of the students in foster care were receiving special education services based on an identification of emotional disturbance. Meanwhile, only 1.3% of the general population of the district was identified with an emotional disturbance (Smucker & Kaufman, 1996). Another study showed that approximately 50% of foster youth in special education are identified for an emotional disturbance (Emerson & Lovitt, 2003). Furthermore, Lee and Jonson-Reid (2009) investigated a sample of 471 children living in poverty and receiving special education services. They discovered that those with a history of contact with a child welfare agency were 33% more likely to be identified with an emotional disturbance. Researchers in the fields of education and foster care have conflicting views about the placement of foster children in special education. Some believe that youth in foster care are over-referred and over-identified for services, while others feel that the resources provided by special education are the most beneficial for this population (Geenen & Powers, 2006; Petrenko, Culhane, Garrido, & Taussig, 2011). Those who believe there are too many foster youth in special education argue that there are three times as many foster children in special education as there are other children (Schubert, 2001). They also cite the Individuals with Disabilities Act (2004), which indicates that children cannot receive special education services if deficits are based on environmental factors, as opposed to a disability (Emerson & Lovitt, 2001). Those on the other side of
the argument cite studies such as Mitic and Rimer’s (2002), which show that children in foster care have significant deficits in reading, writing, numeracy, and language. Moreover, they note that students who receive special education services are more likely to possess specific information regarding their academic needs and performance and have caregivers who are more involved with their education because of the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) process (Petrenko et al., 2011).

**School-based interventions.** Given the instability at home for many foster youth, schools can be a safe place for children to display the strong emotions they may feel in response to the traumatic events they have experienced. While withdrawal and aggression are considered negative and unhealthy reactions, they can be a basis for school personnel to begin interventions that are designed to help foster children cope with their lives in healthier ways. Because school personnel cannot be sure how long a particular foster student may attend their school, quick and early intervention is essential (Emerson & Lovitt, 2003; Pecora, 2012; Scherr, 2010). In the event that a student is in an initial placement in foster care, it may not be efficient to wait for academic or social-emotional deficits to reveal themselves before creating educational support plans. Some professionals in child welfare and education agree that if a student in foster care enrolls in school and educational records are not readily available, permission to complete an initial psychoeducational assessment should be sought (Evans, 2004; Scherr, 2007). Advocates believe that this not only allows for the collection of valuable information from the child, but in the event of a placement change it may be provided to future schools in order to reduce gaps in instruction. While full evaluations for each child in foster care are not
feasible and possibly unnecessary, it is beneficial for teachers to screen and observe the needs of foster children early to be sure interventions are effectively and quickly designed to increase achievement (Evans, 2004; Pecora, 2011; Skinner, Belfiore, & Watson, 2002).

Academic interventions should be geared toward each individual’s needs. It is likely that young children will struggle substantially with pre-reading skills and require interventions that target phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, alphabetic understanding, and oral language ability (Pears et al., 2011). Classroom environment should be taken into consideration when making placement decisions for children in foster care. For instance, it is essential that the child be placed with a teacher who is sensitive and empathetic to his/her situation. As with any child, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) are the most effective way to encourage desired behavior outcomes (Sugai et al., 2010). PBIS assumes that behavior occurs because it is consistently reinforced by something positive, or because the child is using the behavior to escape something negative. For instance, an adolescent child, Amy, who has been in and out of foster care since she was four years old because her mother maltreated her, may struggle with attachment issues. Hence, she resists the attempts of caregivers and teachers to show her approval and affection. For her, being at school and around adults whom she does not trust is a negative experience. Therefore, she skips class to escape interactions with them. A Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) consistent with PBIS would reveal that skipping class was her coping mechanism, or in other words, the function of her behavior. Through collaboration among foster parents and school-based
personnel a behavior plan may be implemented that allows for replacement behaviors for Amy’s skipping class and rewards her for the positive behavior of attending class. With consistent implementation of this plan, Amy will likely stop skipping class (Carr et al., 1999; Cohn, 2001).

**Mental health services.** Older children, especially those exhibiting social and emotional problems, benefit from cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) to cope with previous traumatic events. An intensive CBT based program entitled Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools (CBITS) was created for schools and has demonstrated effectiveness (Jaycox, 2004). CBITS is intended for children aged 10-15 and is completed in ten sessions with students, and includes parents or teachers in three additional sessions. The program teaches children new skills to combat their underlying issues, including correction of maladaptive assumptions, processing the traumatic experience instead of avoiding it, learning new ways to reduce anxiety and solve problems, building peer and parent support, and building confidence to confront stress in the future (Jaycox, Kataoka, Stein, Langley & Wong, 2012). In addition to the CBITS program, the Supporting Students Exposed to Trauma (SSET) program trains teachers and school counselors in the CBITS model (Jaycox, Langley, & Dean, 2009).

**Future planning.** Transition planning is another valuable service schools can provide to older children who are living in foster care. Research on graduation rates and post-graduation endeavors of adults who were previously in foster care are grim. One national survey found that only 35% of the 20,000 children who “aged-out” of the foster care system graduated from high school and only 11% went on to a post-secondary
A more recent study conducted with adults who exited foster care at age 18 or older had similar, but more optimistic findings. Thirty-four percent had graduated school or obtained a Graduate Equivalency Diploma (GED), and 38% enrolled in post-secondary education (Pecora et al., 2006). Even more alarming are the high rates of incarceration, poverty, and homelessness evidenced in substantial research on adults who have aged out of the foster care system (Osgood, Foster, & Courtney, 2010). The research suggests schools should provide students in foster care transition planning to prepare for out-of-placement living, as well as provide them with support and resources regarding graduation and post-secondary education. This requires a strong relationship with the child welfare agency and time devoted to meeting with the students and their stakeholders to plan for involvement in school-to-work programs, job shadowing, resume creating, financial education, and other various life skills training (Scherr, 2010).

**Teachers’ Perceptions of Children in Foster Care**

Studies on teachers’ perceptions of working with students in foster care have shown that teachers find it challenging and demanding. Teachers report that students who live in foster care typically have more emotional and behavioral problems and poor academic performance (Palladino, 2006; Zetlin, MacLeod, & Kimm, 2012). For instance, Bernedo and colleagues (2014) examined foster children’s behavior problems and impulsivity in the school context utilizing the Teacher Behavior Form and the Conners 3 Teacher Rating Scale (Achenbach, 1991; Conners, 1997). Among 104 children in foster care ranging from ages 5-17, a considerable number fell in the borderline or clinical
range, particularly on scales related to externalizing behavior (Bernedo, Salas, Fuentes, & Garcia-Martin, 2014).

Additionally, studies suggest teachers find serving students in foster care to be increasingly difficult because of the lack of consistency and collaboration among stakeholders. For instance, Palladino (2006) examined the experiences of seven secondary special education teachers who had taught students who lived in foster care. Several teachers in this study shared that school administrators never informed them when a child who resides in foster care would be entering their class; most found out by either asking or being told the information from the foster children after they had recognized academic or behavioral problems. Three teachers lamented about how they do not understand the foster care system and felt it made complying with the IEP process difficult. The group was split on their reports of foster parent engagement at school, but all agreed it was their duty to initiate the engagement (Pallidino, 2006).

Recognizing that meeting the needs of students who live in foster care is a difficult feat, Zetlin and colleagues (2012) sought to understand the interactions in the classroom context by questioning beginning teachers about their experiences instructing students living in foster care. The teachers were asked via a written questionnaire how they learned of the student’s foster care status, what kinds of relevant information was provided to them as the students’ teacher, what unique learning, emotional, or behavioral challenges the students in foster care presented, and what school supports were made available. Additionally, general education teachers were asked if they had made a special education referral for a child in foster care and whether the parent, caregiver, or social
worker was involved in the IEP process. Special education teachers were asked how the IEP process was managed for the students in foster care and whether a parent, caregiver, or social worker was involved. Both groups of teachers were asked to describe what supports, services, or training should be made available so that they could be more effective with students in foster care. Themes were identified in the responses, and included: (1) the process of informing teachers of foster care status, (2) the timing and duration of student entry into the classroom, (3) provision of information to teachers, (4) challenges that set foster youth apart from peers, (5) availability of school support to help teachers with challenges, (6) the IEP process, and (7) the needed supports, services, and training.

Zetlin and colleagues (2012) found that most teachers learned about a child’s foster care status through means other than his or her social worker, and that the majority (67%) entered classrooms at the beginning of the school year and stayed the whole year. General education teachers reported receiving no information about why the student was in foster care, while special education teachers were much more informed. Both general and special education teachers often mentioned specific issues that set foster children apart from their peers in the classroom related to learning and behavior challenges. Sadly, many teachers expressed frustration with foster parents and the belief that they were not providing adequate support to the children in their care. Many teachers described having to make special accommodations and adaptations to lessons and assignments because of a child’s foster care status. Sixty percent of teachers in the study indicated there was no special assistance available to help them support the unique needs of foster children and
many felt that in-service training could be beneficial to them in navigating the child welfare system and providing students with appropriate supports (Zetlin et al., 2012).

**The Current Research Study**

Research is lacking regarding what support teachers feel they need in order to best serve the foster care population. The present study addresses the gap in the literature highlighted by Zetlin and colleagues. Zetlin et al (2012) extended beyond most studies focused on the problems associated with foster children by asking teachers what could help them in serving foster youth. Utilizing Zetlin et al (2012) as basis, the current study sought to gather further information to help to develop a framework for school-based strategies and interventions for children in foster care. Furthermore, the present study investigated the experiences, struggles, and needs of teachers in addressing the challenges presented by students who live in foster care. In addition, the present study explored the supports that teachers of foster students are currently receiving and the support they believe could assist them with foster children in the future. Just as one must be aware of the behavioral and educational challenges that foster children have in order to meet their needs, educational professionals must be informed of the needs of the teachers who are serving foster children.
CHAPTER III

METHOD

Research Questions

This research project was an attempt to provide more insight into the experiences of teachers who currently or previously serve(d) students who live in foster care. Additionally, teachers’ perspectives of what could help them be more effective when working with these students were explored. This study explored the following research questions:

Research Question #1. How are teachers informed about the foster care status of a student?

Research Question #2. What supports and services are available to teachers who serve foster students?

Research Question #3. What supports and training do teachers feel are needed to increase their effectiveness in providing appropriate education to students living in foster care?

Participants and Setting

The participants in this study included a purposive, convenience sample of ten teachers from a mid-sized school district in the Midwest. The school district has a student demographic make-up of 64% White, 20.5% Black/African American, 6.9% two or more
races, 5.0% Hispanic/Latino, 3.1% Asian, and 0.16% American Indian/Alaskan native. There are approximately 10,000 students in the district and most live in rural or suburban homes. At the time of the 2000 census, the median family income in the district’s catchment area was $71,161, which was 26% higher than the average family income in the state. As of 2013, the district has a 95% graduation rate.

To be eligible for participation in the study, all of the participants must have taught or be currently teaching a student who lives in foster care. The target number of participants for the study was ten. Because the data collected is qualitative, it was not necessary for the participant pool to provide generalizability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Instead, readers of the study should consider the participants and setting and make judgments about the transferability of the outcomes based on similarities and differences (see Table 1 for participants’ demographic information). In total there were ten participants. The median years of teaching experience was twelve, with the least experienced teacher having two years and the most experienced having twenty-eight. The elementary teacher participants reported teaching all subjects, while the high school special education teacher taught algebra, geometry, and English. The middle school general education teacher reported teaching language arts, reading, and social studies, whereas the middle school special education teacher reported teaching math and language arts, predominantly within a self-contained classroom for students with emotional disturbance (ED).
Table 1

*Participants’ Demographic Data*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Grade(s) taught</th>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Years of experience</th>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
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Research Design

The current study employed a phenomenological qualitative design, described by Bogdan and Biklen (2003) as a study that seeks an individual’s perceptions and meanings of an experience. This design was chosen because the researcher sought to obtain data that allows for recommendations to be made regarding how schools support teachers who have foster children in their classrooms. The use of qualitative methods allowed the study to be inductive, rather than deductive, meaning that it did not impose hypotheses on the data, but rather allowed the data to make its own meaning (Mertens, 2010). Phenomenological design allowed the researcher to cast a wide net for information gathering in order to guide the development of theories. With phenomenological analysis,
information is gathered through both the participants’ personal experiences and common themes that exist amongst participants (Smith Jonathan, 2004).

**Procedures**

The study was approved by the University of Dayton’s Institutional Review Board (IRB; see Appendix A).

**Recruitment and consent.** The researcher sent an email request to the superintendent of the mid-sized school district in the Midwest to obtain permission to conduct the research via one-on-one interviews with the teachers who were eligible for participation. Upon receiving district permission, the researcher sent an e-mail request to the principal of each elementary, middle school, and high school in the district to seek referrals for teachers who were known to have or who may have previously had a foster child in their classroom. No principals referred participants; however, two suggested sending an email request for participants district-wide. Upon doing this, seven participants volunteered themselves, two were referred by a guidance counselor and one was referred by a school psychologist. A guidance counselor referred two additional individuals, but neither was eligible to participate because they had not had a student who lived in foster care in their class. When an individual was referred, he or she was contacted by the primary researcher via email to determine if, in fact, they had taught a foster student and if they were interested in participating in the study. Participation was entirely voluntary. All interested individuals were sent an email with the consent form, which included a description of the thesis project. Additionally, the consent form notified participants that they would be compensated for participation with a $10 gift card to a
local business. Consent was obtained prior to data collection (see Appendix A for a copy of the participant consent form).

**Data collection.** Teachers participated in a semi-structured interview (average length = 28 minutes) with the researcher (see Appendix C). Demographic information was voluntarily collected from participants prior to the interview (see Appendix B) and included: 1) current teaching assignment, 2) years of teaching experience, and 3) subjects and grade levels taught. Interviews were scheduled through email and all interviews occurred at a time and location convenient to the participant. Five interviews were conducted in the researcher’s school office, four were conducted in the teacher’s classroom, and one was conducted in the teacher’s office. The interviews were completed in the fall of the 2013-2014 school year, after teachers had a few weeks to get to know new students. To ensure participants’ confidentiality, each individual was given a pseudonym. To further ensure confidentiality, no identifying information was collected or retained, other than consent forms.

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher using a cross-platform multimedia player. Both the interviewer and participant’s words were included in the transcriptions. Transcribed interviews were reread while listening to the taped interview to ensure accuracy. Interviews were then coded according to Saldana (2013), utilizing notes taken during the interview as well as notes taken when rereading transcriptions. Pre-coded data were organized into themes to allow the researcher to identify common responses to questions and generate true codes. Once codes were developed, they were analyzed and recoded into broader, more general content
descriptors. The purpose of this coding method was to organize the information that emerged from the interviews into coherent and applicable themes by which to better understand the experiences of the participants. These data were qualitative in nature, and analyzed qualitatively for any repeated patterns or thematic content. A colleague familiar with qualitative design reviewed the data along with the transcripts to ensure that the analysis was logical and unbiased. Revisions were made as needed, until intercoder reliability of .81 was achieved. Lombard, Snyder-Duch, and Bracken (2002) state that a criterion of .70 is generally acceptable for research of an exploratory nature.

**Instrument.** Teachers were interviewed using a semi-structured interview (see Appendix C), adapted for the present study from the questionnaire developed by Zetlin et al (2012). Mertens (2010) notes that in qualitative research designs, the researcher is the instrument for collecting data. Thus the researcher decides which questions to ask and in what order, what to observe, and what to record. He or she also ultimately decides how to interpret the data collected, which makes it particularly important to be actively engaged with participant’s responses during the interview (Nastasi & Schensul, 2005). Interview questions may be about behaviors, opinions or values, feelings, knowledge, sensory, or background information. In this particular study, questions were predominantly knowledge and opinion-based (see Appendix C). A fixed-question—open-response design was employed to ensure a balance of scientific rigor and flexible exploration (Weiss, 1994). Open-ended questions allowed participants to share the experiences and perceptions that were unique to them. This also allowed responses to be broad or specific, and as detailed as participants could fathom. All participants were asked the same
questions so responses could be coded, themes identified, and discrepancies discussed (Natasi & Schensul, 2005).

The interview protocol included questions regarding notification of a child’s foster care status, supports and services that were available to teachers while they were teaching the child, and future supports and services they believed would be beneficial for working with foster children. The interview protocol was pilot tested with two teachers who had experience teaching a foster child prior to gathering actual data to address any unforeseen problems with administration. Following pilot testing, several questions were modified to improve clarity.

The criteria typically used to judge the quality of quantitative data are internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity. However, these criteria are not readily utilized with qualitative data. A number of writers have outlined this, but perhaps no others have done so better than Lincoln and Guba (1985). They explain that more appropriate criteria are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility is equated with internal validity, transferability with external validity, dependability with reliability, and confirmability with objectivity. Credibility includes prolonged engagement with data, member checks and peer debriefing, and monitoring developing constructions. Transferability requires the researcher to provide extensive description of the time, place, context, and culture of the research situation. Dependability involves the researcher detailing each step of the process and noting when changes occur. Confirmability has to do with the data being logically induced and independent of the researcher’s imagination. These aforementioned techniques necessary
to obtain credible, transferable, dependable, and confirmable data were employed throughout the interviewing and data analysis process.
CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

This research project examined teachers’ experiences with children who live in foster care. Specifically it sought to discover how teachers are typically informed about a child’s foster care status, the support provided to teachers when a foster student is in their class, and what supports or services teachers believe would be beneficial in increasing their effectiveness with students who live in foster care. The terms “support” and “services” were defined broadly in order to allow teachers to share their genuine opinions and ideas concerning their experiences with children who live in foster care. As the transcribed interviews were reviewed, certain realities and perceptions became evident (i.e., the teacher was informed about the child’s foster care status from his/her school records, the teacher felt too little information regarding the child was shared, the teacher felt more collaboration with the social service agency would be beneficial, etc.).

Theoretical saturation, as defined by Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006), occurs at the point in data collection and analysis when new information produces little or no change in the codebook. Due to the geographical and logistical limitations of this study and the participant pool, theoretical saturation could not be reached.
Research Question One: Informing of Foster Care Status

Upon reviewing the transcribed interview protocols for responses to research question one, regarding how teachers are informed of child’s foster care status; it was evident that there was not a single method for making this information known to teachers. Instead, three general themes emerged—1) teachers were informed by school personnel, 2) teachers were informed by a legal document, and 3) the student self-disclosed.

Informed by school personnel. One theme that emerged was counter to the experiences of teachers in Palladino’s (2006) study, who shared that they were typically informed about a student’s foster care status by the child him or herself. However, similarly, teachers expressed dissatisfaction with how they were informed and the lack of consistency and extent of information shared. Seven of the ten teachers in the current study reported being notified of a student’s foster care status by another individual in the school district. This included being informed by the student’s previous teacher, a school secretary, guidance counselor, or principal.

Pat, a fifth grade general education teacher shared the following:

I found out through the school counselor...She was here the following day. I got the information the week before that she was going to be in the class. It was on a Friday...I knew, yeah, I got an email from the school counselor. So, I knew on Friday, and the Monday she started with us, and I think it was over the weekend, Saturday or Sunday is when she got united with her foster mom.

Lisa, a first grade general education teacher described how she was informed of a student’s foster care status during her first year of teaching.

So um, the principal at the time and the counselor at the time, brought me in and kinda sat down with me and said, you know, here’s the situation with the one. Obviously they couldn’t give me a ton of information, but kinda said what they had experienced in kindergarten with her and I then talked to the kindergarten
teacher and she had kinda given me a heads up too, kinda walked me through some of the stuff they had tried.

John, a middle school special education teacher for students with emotional disturbance shared that he was informed of a child’s foster care status by the student’s former teacher.

Um, well I found out from sharing with the other ED teacher. Even though, I’m 6th grade, she’s 5th, we do a lot with each other’s kids just mostly when the kids get escalated, the last person they want to talk to is their teacher, so I’ll go over and talk to hers and she’ll come over and talk to mine, and that’s what works best in our situation.

Informed by legal document. Another theme reported by teachers in this study was how teachers often acquired information regarding a child’s foster care status from a legal document that existed. This included documents in a student’s cumulative file and documents in a student’s special education file, such as their IEP.

Jessica, a high school teacher special education teacher shared how she was informed of a student’s foster care status by multiple documents.

It was on her, yah, on her IEP. That we had a surrogate parent that we had to have involved. Um, but then I went and got her full cumulative file…there was the document in there that had a lot of the details…yes, the court orders and all that kind of thing.

Mary, a veteran elementary special education teacher described how she discovered a student’s foster care status by an informal note on the student’s school file.

I did have a note that was on the file that I got from. She wasn’t on an IEP; she was on a 504 plan. But the teacher had been working with her and so there was, ya know, a little file in there with her 504 plan. And it said, you know, somewhere on that manila folder she was a foster child…Probably the first teacher that found out, said we’ll put some kind of little note, or ya know, maybe penciled in, or it may. You might notice it or you might not, truthfully.
Student self-disclosed information. Many teachers in the study depicted situations when students discussed their foster care status. Some shared details regarding the circumstances that got them removed from their biological home, while many lamented about their situation and sought comfort from their teachers.

Tina, a third grade general education teacher noted that students who live in foster care typically inform her of their foster care status.

Usually the kids will tell me themselves. Sometimes I will be notified by the office, but not always. But the kids are pretty open and they like to share their stories, you know, right away. So I kind of try to have them talk with me privately before we discuss and then I let them know that, that’s their personal business and they, they don’t have to share that with everybody, because it’s a new situation and it might bring up a lot of unwanted attention.

Similarly, Kate, a third grade general education teacher shared that most of the foster children she has taught inform her of their circumstance.

Well, actually, all of them have told me, but, just in different ways. Some of them were more open than others. Some of them are definitely more open than others. Um, like, my one I got last, or a week ago has already, like, said stuff. She was like, listen, this is why I’m here. And then, like, went through this whole story. And I was like, oh okay…Because I was trying to figure out before I did some assessments, I’m like, so at your old school math, what were you guys learning about? Just basic education questions. Like, what were you guys learning about?...and she was like, I was at this school, and she’s like this is what happened. This is how I got here. And she just like voluntarily told me on her own. Um, then I had other ones, like I said, last year the one that started out as a behavior problem, he was like real closed up. But he was like, he was very emotional. And he ended up, like, I mean there would be several days, more days than not that he would end up in tears.

In a unique situation, the student remained with the same teacher before and after being placed into foster care. In this case, the teacher, Mary, was aware of the abuse the child was experiencing and played a role in him being removed from his biological home.
And so finally, um, he got taken out of the home after he, ya know, had to get to school so he could show me his bruise. But he showed the principal first, so the principal called me in and I looked at it and...well that I bawled my eyes out. I had never seen that. So, poor little guy. And then I felt bad because of course he wanted to get to me to tell me because I’m gonna help him. Well he ended up getting pretty angry because he was taken away from them, he thought he’d go, ya know, right to his mother because his parents were divorced and he had to go to the foster home in between and he was pretty angry.

Research Question Two: The Supports and Services Available

Following the review of interview transcripts for research question two regarding the supports and services teachers had received when faced with the challenges foster students present, four themes emerged across the participants’ responses. These themes included: 1) behavioral intervention assistance from school personnel, 2) academic intervention assistance from school records or screening measures, 3) collaborative support from foster parents, and 4) independent endeavors.

Behavioral intervention assistance. The majority of participants in this study who depicted situations in which the student living in foster care required intensive behavioral intervention indicated some type of support from other school personnel. This included “back-up plans” made with the guidance counselor for particularly bad days, permitting the student to talk to another teacher, guidance counselor, or principal when necessary, and former teachers sharing information about past behavioral interventions.

Lisa described how a guidance counselor and school psychologist assisted with behavior intervention planning and progress monitoring.

The counselor just being there to come talk me through what I should do for certain situations. Be there to kinda help me prepare if we knew something was gonna be out of the ordinary. We knew that Wednesdays were the days she went to talk with the counselor at social services. So, Wednesday mornings were always bad for her. So Wednesday afternoons were always bad for us at school.
That type of thing. So just kinda helping me prepare for Wednesdays. Kinda would always have a strategy if, ‘hey this is what, what Wednesday could be if we need to do this. I’m available’. The principal would come and help if needed. Um, a lot of times it was allowing me to take my class somewhere else and allow them to go in my classroom with her, because that was actually easier than trying to…And then when we were going to have to go the testing route with her the school psych made sure I was documenting everything we needed to. And kinda getting out ducks in a row so we could set up the process…Obviously, being brand new, I didn’t really know. They were both; they were all really supportive.

Sara, an elementary school special education teacher noted how various school personnel assisted with a foster student who was displaying disruptive and violent behavior.

I had one last year, um, he was just in a foster home, wasn’t planning on adopting him, he was very violent, would tear the room. I would have to evacuate the room a lot last year. He was in third grade. We had to come up with a bunch of behavioral plans between us and spec ed and the office. Because he would destroy a room. When he would start the other staff and the other kids in the room would hide under the tables. They were frightened of him.

I know he was allowed to go to the counselor whenever he wanted to and he could go down to the assistant principal and talk to him if he wanted to. And he knew all the adults; he could talk to anybody he wanted to, if he needed a quiet place to go to, to calm down or whatever he was able to do that.

Kate shared how a colleague helped her to implement an effective behavior plan.

I know I also worked out with the gym teacher, like if he had a good week, because there were some behavior problems were he would just throw fits, or like, get under his desk and not wanna work and, I mean, it was mainly the focus of, he wanted to go home…we worked out if he had good days, then like on Fridays he went down and had like a half hour with the gym teacher one-on-one…got, like, basketball time, because that was something he was really into and they’d just, like, talk sports and whatever, because he didn’t have, like, a guy role model at the time.

Emily, a fourth grade general education teacher, described how a guidance counselor provided assistance when a foster student in her class needed emotional support.
But ‘guidance counselor’s name’ worked with me as well when I had that other little girl and here when I had the boy and she’s a great help too, and like I said, the guidance counselors have come along away from the time I started until know. She was able to kind of talk with him and, you know, if they were having a bad day or whatever, she could get them calmed down and figure out what was going on if I didn’t have the time to do it.

**Academic intervention assistance.** Another theme that emerged was participants’ reports of utilizing existing records and/or data for assistance with academic interventions for students living in foster care. While more teachers noted behavioral challenges than academic challenges, several teachers noted that a typical foster student struggles academically. Teachers reported that records from previous schools and/or teachers were helpful, as was quick assessment with a universal screening measure to determine the student’s baseline of academic skills.

Kate reported all of the foster students she has had in the past two years have been below grade level academically and required academic intervention. Additionally, she noted how records from previous schools serve as a baseline of academic skills.

I’ve seen a lot of them obviously come in below grade level. Are usually struggling. Have to be picked up for some type of intervention. Um, even the one I just got on the 29th is starting intervention today. She is a couple grade levels, all three of them I’ve had in the past two years are a good couple grade levels below.

Well, I know like once, I mean, once records are released and sent over from where they come then we kinda have their grades, which is like a baseline. So eventually we do get some information. It just takes time…it varies.

Tina noted the helpfulness of quickly completing academic screening measures to determine foster students’ skills and deficits.

His academics were very subpar. As a third grader he had already been in four different school districts. So he has been moved a lot she has lost a lot of instructional time. So his reading and his academics were, his reading was very difficult, um, math he was nervous a lot so that was difficult for him. He actually
just this past week or two weeks got glasses, so apparently he needed glasses, you know, so just little things like that made it difficult for him to succeed…The good thing is we do diagnostic testing right away. The STAR math and STAR reading so we could tell, instead of waiting until after I teach a whole chapter and give a test. We can tell right away. Ok, well his grade equivalent on this test is second grade, so he’s already a year behind so we need to start interventions right away. So, which was really great we got him moved right into the, um, RTI access…But the diagnostic testing really helps kind of figure out where they are and to help them.

Half of the participants were special education teachers and thus had students who were identified with an educational disability. Not all participants were asked to distinguish when students were identified with an educational disability—before foster care placement or during; however, those that were asked to do so indicated students were identified while in foster care. No teachers mentioned IEP progress reports being particularly helpful in regards to academic planning; however, it is noteworthy that many of the foster students discussed by participants had an IEP with academic goals.

Jennifer, an elementary special education teacher attempted to recall whether the foster students she served were identified with an educational disability before or while they were living in foster care.

My current student was (identified) while in foster care; although, she’s been in foster care the majority of her life. So while she was in foster care, as well as, I had her sister and she was also identified while in foster care…My first student was identified probably while in foster care. And then um, in between there has been a couple kids that have had foster care, and I think two were identified…the two girls were, are both SLD (specific learning disability) labels. My first little guy was an LD and the others were…maybe SLD.

Emily, a general education teacher, noted two foster students who had academic challenges. Interestingly, she shared her perception that one might not have truly had an
educational disability—although he was identified for special education services—because his behavior inhibited him performing well academically.

They both had academic challenges. Like I said, the little girl I think was just genetics. I think she may have been a crack baby as well. Very tiny little girl. The one that I had here, he was in special ed, but I’m thinking that he really didn’t need to be. I think it was more of being bounced around in the younger years and probably at home because when I was working with him he was very, very intelligent and could do it. But I think behaviors; I think got in the way of things.

One participant, Lisa, described referring a foster student for special education services because of suspected emotional disturbance.

And then once we knew we were going to have to go the testing route with her, which was really early on, the school psych made sure I was documenting everything we needed to. And kinda getting our ducks in a row so that we could set up the process…he just kinda walked me through. Obviously being brand new, I didn’t really know…And then the second year, obviously, we still didn’t have her qualified completely because of all the loopholes we were trying to jump through, but kinda just making sure we stayed on track to get the ED qualification.

**Collaborative support from foster parent(s).** The next theme that emerged was participants’ reports of foster parents being supportive and how that was beneficial to serving foster students. Specifically, these teachers felt that meetings and discussions with foster parents were helpful in providing more information about the child and his or her circumstance and, at times, assisted with improving the child’s overall behavior.

Pat reported gaining background information from a conference with a student’s foster mom, which he found to be helpful.

…Just as an overall student she’s somewhat low. She, um, she’s had a lot of attendance issues since she was in kindergarten. I talked to the guidance counselor and she couldn’t, really couldn’t give me any information as far as why. There was a lot of things in her record that showed she was absent or late, and it wasn’t until we had parent teacher conferences when the foster mom came in and told us that basically at her home she was, um, she was taking on the mother role for her
siblings, for her younger siblings, and it was a situation where she was getting her brother and sisters, younger siblings ready for school...And when I talked to her foster mom she said it’s been really difficult for her, for the student to adjust to being a student. She is still trying to do things she doesn’t need to do, and the foster mom is trying to let her know, to tell her that, you know, it is okay...you’re just a child. You’re nine or ten years old, your supposed, your priorities are to go to school to get an education and learn things...I just got a little bit of information from her records, that helped a little bit, but then the conference with foster mom, really helped out.

Mary recalled the situation in which she had a student before he was placed into foster care and while he was living with foster parents. She reported their efforts helped him to make great gains.

The kids didn’t have, you know, clean clothes for school. So it was just, ya know, in that way a mess all the way around. I feel like the woman really loved, she did love her kids. She and her husband were probably both low IQ...And he was a totally different kid as far as he was clean. He tried in school. They (foster parents) got him glasses...The people were very involved and, um, I think the foster dad was a pastor somewhere...And so they had already raised their kids and decided to do some foster work...They did a great job with them. And he really blossomed and really, ya know, he would talk a lot more. Before he would barely talk. I wasn’t sure if he could hardly talk. But he, ya know, he improved a lot.

**Independent endeavors.** While most participants indicated support or services in some form, the majority depicted situations in which they frequently worked independently. Perhaps the most common theme that arose among the participants was a description of building a relationship with the student and providing instructional accommodations and modifications. These included one-on-one and small group instruction, frequent breaks, and extended time to complete assignments.

Pat described how he assisted a foster student in acclimating to his classroom routine, as well as provided her with breaks during instructional time.
…When I work with her during class I try to give her breaks, you know, it was really significant once I understood, because foster mom came in and said she’s dealing with so many different things. Because when she came in, you know, we had already established classroom routines and everything, and she’s just walking in, and adjusting, and even for a student that’s academically fine, it’s still an adjustment to walk into a new classroom where everyone else around you has established everything and knows what’s going on…I’ve got to take some steps back, and retrain my brain to, you know, explain to her what we’re doing, you know, I can’t just assume she’s already done it, so it’s like going backward to the first day of school with her.

Lisa expressed recognizing that a foster child’s inappropriate behavior stemmed from a desire for adult attention and, therefore, accommodating for this need.

…Total acting out. She would go through outbursts. Throwing things, hiding, running away from school. She would, you know, take off. Um, total defiance. And a lot of it was just to get my attention. She wanted, she did a lot better with one-on-one vs. whole group setting. She wanted the attention.

Similarly, Kate and Jennifer shared how the foster students they served required extended time and frequent breaks.

And giving them breaks when needed…and let them know, like, if your not feeling it…here you can take some time or ask, like, I know last year my one, that’s what I had to do a lot. Is just to give him breaks and…from the things if it was too difficult or sometimes give it to him in the form of technology because he didn’t always view that as hard, because he thought of it as fun. So even though he was still working, it was in a different way or an incentive to get him to work.

…He needed more time. Like he needed time. He needed things explained to him. But then, he also needed to know that there are expectations and it was expected that he was gonna do them.

Many teachers noted the importance of being patient and developing trust prior addressing academic or behavioral concerns. Several participants described listening to foster students’ stories, validating them, and encouraging them to overcome their hardships.
Jessica recalled a unique situation that occurred which created a bond between her and a foster student.

She showed up to my classroom with a bag, like a Wal-Mart bag, of her clothes for the next three nights and she was crying and she just, ya know, I started crying. She asked me, could I keep my stuff in here because I don’t know who’s picking me up after school?…We, ya know, we worked really well together. I liked her. We got along really well. She, we just bonded. I just really cared about her a lot and I think she knew that. But when she opened up to me about that and asked if she could keep that in there that really changed our relationship. She started to open up more. She kinda trusted, I think, as much as I could, I would be there for her and allow her to talk and kinda be this stability when she was being sent to respite or whatever the case was.

Tina described changing her instructional and communication techniques to meet the needs of foster students.

I really treat them different…I turn on the patience jar with them. I am just more willing to go the extra mile with them. Um, kinda love on them a little bit more than, you know, the other kids get more attention. Smile at them a lot, just kind of make eye contact. Just little things like that to kind of make them feel safe…I talk to them in a way that’s kind of real world applicable and kind of like, you know, especially if they are not kind of doing what they are supposed to be doing. I say, you know, ‘I believe in you. You can do this.’ You know, ‘If you wanna grow up and do something or be somebody.’ You know, stuff like that. I kind of talk to them like that because I know that they are already at a disadvantage and things possibly could get worse, you know, and try to put that but in. That there’s life after the little issues that you might be having with math or science or things like that, so there’s a bigger picture to strive for.

Sara, an elementary school special education teacher, noted how she offers for foster students to talk to her about their issues and offers them encouragement.

And a lot of times I would talk to him and say ‘Let’s go in here and lets talk. What’s going on?’ and we talked about some things and just tried to calm him down and then I would ask if he wanted to go talk to the counselor, ‘Do you want her in on this?’ and sometimes he would say no because, like one time I took him in there and we talked about…and she said I’ve gotta call home and let them know what’s going on and he said, ‘No I don’t want you to do that because the last time I got in trouble…And so we would talk and I would give him some
pointers and say, ‘I know this is not ideal for you, this situation, but its really a good thing that you are getting a home’.

Similarly, Jennifer described talking to foster students about their circumstance in order to help them learn to make good choices.

…That’s something that we worked on quite a bit. You know, if you’re making good choices, how to make good choices. Sometimes, making a good choice for you is being in survival mode. But then saying, ‘Look, okay, I can’t do this right now.’ And then recognizing that, ‘I can’t read this right now. I got stuff on my mind, you know, something’s not right. I can’t talk about it because, you know, a lot of times they just shut down. They don’t have the words; they don’t have that language ability.

Kate described how forming a relationship with the foster student helped to improve the student’s defiant behavior.

I know that, with my one that I ended up forming a pretty good relationship with, like, I had to talk to him a lot first to get him on my side. There was a lot of behavior stuff in the beginning. Like, refusing to even work because he knew he was behind, so like, he didn’t even put forth the effort, so from that stance I had to, more so I don’t wanna say be there as a friend, but like, build that relationship with him. To get more comfortable with me and to let him realize that I really did want to help him, before I could be, like, the teacher and help him one-on-one. I know with those kids, um, I end up spending a lot more time with them one-on-one than a lot of other students, I mean, they definitely need a lot, require a lot more time. Just because you never know when they’re gonna be thinking about something either, like, home life, whatever else that’s going on that might interfere that day that you have to figure out, ‘Hey what’s going on?’ and maybe talk to them about it. You know, to help them feel a little better to get on track to even be able to work on the assignments and things.

Research Question Three: Supports, Services, and Training Needed

Upon reviewing the transcribed interviews for responses to the third research question regarding what teachers feel they need in order to be more effective in educating foster children, three themes emerged—1) more in-depth background information, 2) more home-school-agency collaboration, and 3) direct services for foster children.
More in-depth background information. The first theme that emerged in response to this research question was that teachers would like to receive more in depth information about the child’s background. Many expressed understanding of the limits of confidentiality, but felt that being informed of a child’s experiences might give them a better understanding of how to approach educating the student.

Jessica expressed frustration over confidentiality and how it limits teachers’ ability to be informed of foster students’ challenges.

…I mean, yah, like informed. I know, we know there is confidentiality, but there’s also, we need to be able to inform people, other teachers of, you know, the needs and of the student characteristics of those in their classroom. So, I don’t know where the balance is for that…It’s frustrating.

Emily reported knowing more background information about foster students would help her to better meet their unique needs.

I know it’s probably not our right to know, but just to know more of their background. To know maybe why some of the behaviors are there. Like I said, that little girl I’m suspecting there was probably some kind of abuse there. It would be helpful to know. We wouldn’t have to know all of the details, but just enough to understand what exactly went on and what we could do to help support them in the classroom and make it better for them…because, I mean, it makes a difference if they are like a drug and alcohol baby versus someone that was abused. They are all different and we have to approach them in different ways. So, if we just had a little more background than we would be very, very helpful.

Several teachers described putting significant effort into obtaining further information and conveyed resulting frustration for how long it takes to receive additional information surrounding the child’s foster care status.

I mean the background information, I mean, I had to do a lot of digging myself, um, and the only thin I had to go off of were school records, her previous school records from her home school I didn’t have anything else to go off of other than just talking with her, and the first few days were just difficult because she was in a new setting… I don’t know what kind of information can be released and what
can’t. I mean there’s a lot of things that are private, but it’s like, for the sake of the child, I just, you know.

I mean, it would definitely be nice sometimes to know what, like, the background you’re working with. Are they emotional? Are they, like, angry and physical? Like, do they have behavior problems? Because we don’t really get much as far as, unless they have like a written 504 plan or something for behavior don’t really get anything on their behavior. Ya know what I mean? It’s almost like, all academics. So I guess definitely knowing like behaviors and things would be helpful, just to, like I said, you spend a lot of time with these kids. Like, figuring them out getting them comfortable and if you had, you knew some of that ahead of time, or like, at least when they got here then it would kinda give you a start. You wouldn’t have to take so much time trying to figure out what would like, get them to open up to you and feel comfortable.

One teacher indicated a unique situation in which knowing and being able to disclose background information about the foster child may have prevented harm to other children.

She actually touched others in the classroom. When I wasn’t around. She would wait until gym or playground or things like that. So even if it, we possibly would’ve had a way to tell other teachers, because then we legally weren’t allowed to make all of that known to everybody, but making, I guess, making other teachers aware that my class there might be certain circumstance that they needed to watch. And make them aware of it more so when I wasn’t always there. If their eyes might’ve been on her a little bit more, and stopped what could’ve been stopped. I think that’s the only thing…just so everybody else could be more safe.

Increased home-school-agency collaboration. The second theme that emerged from the interview data pertaining to research question three was participants’ desire for more home-school-agency collaboration. Several participants proposed holding structured meetings with foster parents, social workers, and school personnel in which all stakeholders could discuss the needs of the child and plan for how to best help him or her. Others reported a need for schools and social service agencies to better support foster parents in obtaining valuable resources and meeting the needs of foster children.
Pat suggested having a conference with teachers, the guidance counselor, social service agency, and foster parents to discuss the child’s greatest need(s).

I mean the caseworker, the social worker, having them, having a conference with, so you know basically teacher in the classroom, the teachers that are going to be teaching the student, the guidance counselor, caseworker, social worker, and the foster parents, and you get all of them together, and you know, establish a common ground. You know, ‘What’s going on here? What does this child most need at this point and how can I, as a teacher, be more beneficial to the student in this time where school is not a number one priority…And so just getting that information, having that group of people together and talking through things. Just getting, I mean, I think that I would have had a lot more knowledge when she walked in the first day, I could’ve helped her from the very first day up until now or until whenever she leaves. I think I could have done more, more than I have. Just having that short meeting, that cooperation for a short meeting or whatever, before she came in to my classroom. I think that would have been really beneficial.

Similarly, Lisa reported she would like for a collaborative meeting to be mandatory whenever a foster student enters a new classroom.

Maybe more time in the day just to talk to those people involved. Or a day set aside. Even at the beginning of the year that you have to sit down. Like it might almost be mandatory. Like, right now, the teachers are just kinda left. I had these kids in my class, I had to touch base with that, well, it might need to be mandatory that, everybody involved with that child has to sit down at the beginning of the year, even if they just had an IEP. We’re setting up a 30-minute block for everybody involved, like the caseworker and everyone. Everybody has to be here for a half hour to go over stuff. I think that would be a good thing to see going.

Tina and Emily, respectively, expressed a desire for social service agencies to support teachers directly by disseminating information or providing training to school personnel regarding best practices with students who live in foster care.

I think it would nice if social services would work with the counselors maybe in creating a program that would be helpful or just giving us some type of advice or, instead of me having to just Google, ‘How to help a foster kid’, you know? Just a little sheet of bullet points of, you know, what we could do to be helpful, you know, or what not to say or what to say. You know, something like that would be nice.
…I guess just to be there if they have meltdown or whatever here at school. If the guidance counselor couldn’t do anything just for them to be able to come in or maybe send somebody in. Because they might have more insight into what needs to be done.

A number of participants expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of care students received from their foster parents and felt that schools and social service agencies could improve outcomes for foster children by better educating foster parents. Several teachers mentioned that the school assisted foster parents in obtaining valuable resources and understanding the child’s education.

Mary noted that collaboration between the home, school, and social service agency may help to ensure foster students are being adequately cared for.

So I think, ya know, I do wish that they worked more with the school, because I never know what’s going on with, ya know, with the child too much. You don’t know, truthfully, if they’re in a much better situation in the foster home than they were…Ya know, and as far as really seeing that this child got her homework done, or that she had clean clothes or any if that. None of that was happening. So you could have that conversation if you had a social worker there at least you saw every now and then. Or if somebody called you or something.

Similarly, Jennifer expressed frustration with some foster parents and noted that schools may be able to provide helpful training that could benefit foster children.

I think another thing that would be really helpful is educating the foster families because I don’t know what kind of training they get, but the ones I’ve been with have not been overly well educated on things. Just like the one that I have know, doesn’t understand when you bring three new girls into the house, she’s not gonna be friendly…So that and how to work with the system.

Sara advised increased foster parent involvement in order to educate them of the assistance and resources available to them from the school.

…You want to get on everyone’s side, as a team, obviously. And with the foster parents. And then just offer anything up because it may be new foster parents that
don’t now, like, there might be some things that are out there that they don’t know about…some other services that the don’t know about…Like, for instance, if they come here they get free and reduced lunch. They may not know that. Because the agency may have just shoved them in the home and didn’t tell them.

**Direct services for foster children.** The final theme that emerged was teachers’ recommendation of providing direct services to students who live in foster care. Many participants made suggestions as to how best teachers can interact with foster students in order to establish a trusting, working relationship. At times this included providing instructional accommodations; more often it involved listening to the student and getting to know their story. Others expressed a desire for foster students to participate in individual or small-group counseling at school.

Jessica suggested teachers make extra time in their schedule to spend getting to know the foster children they serve.

…As a general education teacher you maybe don’t have that opportunity, I don’t know, usually there’s time to help them, whether its after school or during, you know, take a lunch period here and there…just take, finding those other times when you could maybe build those bonds…I think it’s about, you know, getting to really know their story too.

John described establishing a relationship with foster children by allowing them to express their feelings, as well as validating the hardships they have experienced.

With my kids, you have to listen to them. Just sit there and just, you have to listen to them. Let them get everything out. Try not to be judgmental. Some of their stories are horrific. And just be honest with them. Tell them, like, ‘I hear what you're saying. I can’t relate to you because I’m not in that situation. I'm sure its bad like you say, but what can we do, what I do for you to help you work through this?’ I know, I mean, what some of these kids have gone through, in their twelve years, I haven’t gone through it…Just don’t say, ‘I know how you feel.’ Don’t lie to them, because you don’t. And kids, they can see through that. They just want someone to listen to them.
Tina and Jennifer recommended teachers approach each foster student uniquely and compassionately in order to establish trust and provide them with stability.

I would say you need to treat them as if they were on an IEP. Like, special needs, all the way. Emotionally, academically, I mean, you just have to be patient. You have to show that they can trust you. Otherwise they will shut down and you wont get anything from them. So just trust and understanding and kind showing that they are safe and that this is a safe environment for them. So even if they come in and they treat you like dirt, you know what I mean, you have to charge it to what they are going through, don’t take it personal. Because once they see they can treat you like dirt and you’re still going to be supportive, then they start chipping down kind of at the, you know, and getting to the real person in there. Especially if they have been at foster care a lot or for an extended period of time.

You need to listen to them. Watch their body language. Watch what they say, how they do, how they response to things. You can figure out their nuances. What makes them tick. And then once you do that, you can motivate them. You know, if it’s not meaningful to them…it doesn’t work. And they know how to shut it off, because they’ve had to. That’s how they survive…You have to understand that that level of existence, that survival mode. And when you can figure that out, then you can start to eliminate parts of that. And build their confidence. And build their stability and their security.

Kate suggested pairing foster children with peer buddies and reiterated the need to provide them with one-on-one support.

…Even to you, you know, like, some good peers to buddy them up with that might be able to make a connection with or, depending on what’s going on with them, that like, we know would be supportive to help them with that. I mean, that would be helpful also. I mean, I think the most important thing is, one, I mean you have to have patience with them and you have to know that they are going to require a lot of your time...Sometimes they will qualify for something special ed wise, but most of the time not because its environment why they’re low…So you’re gonna be spending a lot of time one-on-one with them or in a small group after doing whole group lessons. Just to get them to follow along. So, I mean, the most important thing I would say is, from the beginning try to form a relationship with them. That they know, I mean, you’re there to help them. And try to, I guess, form that trust.

Several teachers expressed a desire for schools to provide individual or small-group counseling to foster students. These participants recognized the challenges living in
foster care presents to children, such as a lack of control over their circumstance and social isolation.

He though he’d get to go, ya know, right to his mother because his parents were divorced and he had to go to the foster home in between and he was pretty angry. So I think in some of these situations they do, somebodies gotta do some counseling and get them to understand, ya know, what the process is.

Even if there were some type of group for the students who are all foster. You know what I mean? Like, just to bond with each other or I don’t know if that’s realistic...I don’t know if they’d feel comfortable, but.

We used to have groups where if you were like, your family was divorced or if you had a death in the family or things like that or illness. They would meet like periodically and I think that they should have a foster kid group just so that they know they are not the only ones, the only one that has to live at somebody else’s house and its very confusing. So just a place that they could talk weekly or bi-weekly that would be nice. Because it would us, I think, with some of the emotional outburst or the kind of behavior that you know could arise just from being angry about their situation.
CHAPTER V  
DISCUSSION

Review of Purpose and Interpretation of Findings

Research indicates that children in foster care are faced with many challenges including academic difficulties, emotional instability, and behavioral struggles.

Research-based recommendations regarding how schools can best support students who live in foster care exist; however, few studies identify if and how schools are following these recommendations (McKellar & Cowan, 2011). Furthermore, implementing school-based interventions often lies on the shoulders of classroom teachers who are also tasked with educating twenty to thirty additional students. It is apparent that they will need administrator and system-wide support in order to effectively meet the many needs of foster students.

A better understanding of teachers’ perceptions of the supports they have found helpful and the support they feel they need may assist schools in setting guidelines for appropriately serving students who live in foster care. The challenges these students face affect not only their quality of life, but also the individuals and systems around them (Osgood, Foster, & Courtney, 2010). The current research study may guide local and state agencies in developing a framework that will improve outcomes for children who live in foster care. The purpose of this project was to examine how teachers are informed
of a child’s foster care status, what supports and services are available to teachers who
serve foster students, and what supports, services, or training are necessary to increase
teachers’ effectiveness in providing foster students with an appropriate education. By
gaining insight into this information, schools may better identify individuals who can
consult with teachers when issues arise and implement fundamental changes in how they
approach educating students who live in foster care.

Results of this study indicate there is inconsistency in how teachers are informed
of a child’s foster care status. Contrary to previous research, many participants were
informed of a child’s foster care status by another member of school personnel
(Palladino, 2006; Zetlin et al., 2010; Zetlin et al., 2012). However, the individual who
informed them varied, including principals, guidance counselors, previous teachers, and
school secretaries. Several participants reported that they would not have known a child’s
foster care status if it had not been on a school record or if the child had not self-disclosed
the information. It is apparent that school systems could benefit from a consistent
protocol for notifying teachers of a student’s foster care status. Additionally, many
teachers expressed dissatisfaction with only knowing a student’s foster care status and
expressed a desire to obtain background information surrounding the child’s entry into
foster care. Participants felt that knowledge regarding the maltreatment or extenuating
circumstances (i.e., death of a parent) that led to the student’s out-of-home placement
might assist them in developing a better working relationship with the child and
providing appropriate accommodations in the classroom. This suggests that perhaps
instead of maintaining confidentiality and withholding this information, teachers may be
better served by disclosure of this information and entering into a confidentiality agreement themselves. Future research will be necessary to determine if disclosing additional information to teachers truly benefits the foster children. Results from the current study implied that teachers were more patient and sympathetic with students when they were aware of the hardships that had experienced. Additionally, many teachers described situations in which they acted as a counselor to students and felt that this level of involvement was more effective once they knew the child’s background.

Participants in this study reported several themes regarding the supports and services they found to be helpful with the challenges foster students present. These included behavioral intervention assistance from school personnel, academic intervention assistance from school records or screening measures, and collaborative support from foster parents. Perhaps the most widely expressed theme was the independent endeavors of teachers. This theme was particularly interesting because it has not been directly addressed in previous literature. These independent endeavors included building a relationship with foster students and providing instructional accommodations and modifications, such as one-on-one instruction, frequent breaks, and extended time to complete assignments. Many teachers shared the need to be patient and develop trust prior to being able to address academic or behavioral concerns. As previously mentioned, several participants described relationships with foster students that resembled more of a client-counselor relationship than a teacher-student, such as listening to foster students’ stories, validating them, and encouraging them to overcome their hardships. This was both endearing and alarming, in that the informal counseling may have been constructive,
but teachers may not be qualified to provide the intensive counseling children in foster care require. These findings indicate teachers may need specific training in how to develop and maintain appropriate relationships with students in foster care and that those students may need increased access to school-based mental health services.

Participants also reported that school guidance counselors were a key support when foster students were exhibiting emotional and behavior challenges. Guidance counselors often calmed students who had emotional meltdowns and assisted with designing and implementing formal behavior plans. Also helpful in these situations were other staff members who provided foster students with breaks from their classroom as well as positive reinforcement for good behavior. It is apparent that teachers of foster children could benefit from additional training in behavioral interventions and continued support from other school personnel when designing and implementing these interventions. In general, teachers expressed more frustration regarding the lack of information provided in foster students’ records than their helpfulness. Still, several participants indicated having students’ previous grades assisted them in determining a baseline for academic skills, as did quickly screening their academic skills with a curriculum-based measure. This finding is in line with research that recommends foster students complete sample assignments and tests soon after placement into a new school in order to determine their academic abilities (Evans, 2004; Pecora, 2011; Scherr, 2010; Skinner, Belfiore, & Watson, 2002). However, teachers only reported one screening measure and how quickly the screening occurred did not appear to be consistent. It seems
teachers could benefit from increased access to academic screening measures as well as a set process by which to approach each new foster student.

Several teachers noted supportive foster parents were an asset to them when determining how to best meet the educational needs of the foster child. Results indicated the primary resource foster parents provided was additional background information regarding the child. This included details about what lead to the child’s removal from their biological home, their current foster home living situation, and the outside services (i.e. counseling) being provided to the child. It was unclear why such information was determined to be so beneficial, outside of it playing apart in establishing a bond between the teacher and the foster student. No participants clearly indicated how their behavior changed based on the provision of this information, however it appeared likely that teachers felt more empathy and/or sympathy after it was revealed and, in turn, interacted more patiently with the foster child. As best practices suggest, increased home and school collaboration will likely benefit both schools and foster families (Scherr, 2010).

Participants conveyed three themes related to the supports they feel would help them be more effective when working with students who live in foster care. A matter discussed throughout many interviews included the desire for more in-depth background information. In addition to obtaining background information, some teachers expressed a desire to be able to share known information with other school personnel, without repercussions for violating the students’ rights of confidentiality. Participants pointed to the benefit of knowing the child’s past behavior problems—if they exist—in order to more quickly implement strategies and interventions that would decrease such problems.
Additionally, one participant shared a perceived need to inform other school personnel of a child’s background, if that background may lead to harmful or dangerous behaviors. While privacy laws and issues with confidentiality present difficulty to disseminating information about a child’s background, the likelihood of foster children engaging in high-risk behavior has been documented in previous literature (Gramkowski et al., 2009; Lin, 2012; Smith Dana, 2004; Smith, Leve, & Chamberlain, 2006). Therefore, it is crucial for schools to be aware of these risks and implement preventative interventions. Knowing a foster child’s experiences of abuse and/or maltreatment appears to be a good indicator of these risks (Smith Dana, 2004; Smith, Leve, & Chamberlain, 2006).

Participants also noted a desire for more home-school-agency collaboration. Many teachers felt that including social workers in meetings with the school and foster parents would develop a team approach that would be in the best interest of the foster child. More specifically, one teacher proposed for social services to work with the school to provide trainings and/or disseminate information to teachers about how best to help a foster child. Additionally, some participants noted that foster parents are under-educated about the school system and the academic needs of their foster children. These teachers felt that providing trainings regarding available resources, intervention, and special education services to foster parents would be beneficial. Also, one teacher implied that including social workers would help schools more effectively address undesirable foster parent behavior (i.e., sending student to school in dirty clothes, incomplete student homework). These findings were in line with copious amounts of research that indicates schools and social service agencies are lacking in terms of collaboration (Ferguson &
Wolkow, 2012; Palladino, 2006; Zetlin et al., 2010). Unfortunately, it is unclear whether social service agencies have the desire or resources to support increased collaboration with the school and the level of commitment necessary for the type of support teachers were describing would be extensive. Schools will likely need to appoint an individual—possibly a school psychologist—to act as a liaison between the two entities, as suggested by Scherr (2010).

Finally, participants recommended direct services are provided to students who live in foster care. This primarily involved suggestions as to how individual teachers can best interact with foster students in order to establish a trusting, working relationship. Many teachers noted a need to spend additional time one-on-one with foster students and, likewise, suggested listening to and getting to know their life stories. Several participants expressed a desire for foster students to participate in individual or small-group counseling. Reasons behind these suggestions appeared to involve recognition of the severe emotional and behavioral struggles of many foster students, as well as a desire for them to make peer connections at school. Participants did not indicate a need for schools to provide intensive mental health services, such as CBITS (Jaycox et al., 2012), but rather counseling that may improve foster children’s daily social emotional functioning.

School districts and social service agencies should be aware that teachers feel underprepared when faced with educating students who live in foster care. One participant described well the experience of many teachers when she shared “sometimes you can feel like you’re on an island in your little classroom” and that teachers could benefit from training that communicates “their options of what they are able to do in the
classroom” (Lisa, personal communication, November 1st, 2013). Participants often spent copious amounts of time building a relationship and acting as counselors to foster children. Many teachers stressed the importance of creating a bond with foster children and seemed to measure their success with a foster child on the quality of that bond.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study, beginning with the limited scope of the design. Due to the homogenous setting, the generalizability of this research is limited. The participants consisted of teachers within the same school district, which could lead to bias, and limits the breadth of experiences teachers had to share. The goal in qualitative research is to reach a point of theoretical saturation which, as defined by Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2000), as a point in data collection and analysis when new information produces little or no change in the codebook. Due to the geographical and logistical limitations of this study and the participant pool, theoretical saturation could not be reached. It is questionable whether this would be possible even with a much larger sample, because no two teachers or foster student’s experience is the same. Additionally, the fact that many teachers referred themselves for participation implies they may have had a special interest in foster children, which could have introduced bias in the data.

The nature of the semi-structured interview format may also have led to skewing of data, as there is necessarily a degree of human interactions involved in the data-gathering process. It is possible that participants may have answered research questions in a particular way because it was viewed as more favorable or what the researcher expected to hear. Further, they nature of qualitative data collection and analysis involves
a degree of inference and interpretation by the researcher. It is possible that verbal responses were misunderstood during data collection or that unconscious bias existed during data analysis.

**Implications for Future Research**

While there is still not clear data to support the development of a framework for providing school-based services to foster children, examining the opinions of teachers who likely know students better than other school personnel provides a basis on which we can begin building recommendations. The current study’s findings closely resembles those of Zetlin et al (2012) indicating that teachers want to know more background information about a child’s foster care status and wish there were more collaboration between the foster home, school, and social service agency. Future research is necessary to determine if disclosing more background information is truly beneficial to the educational success of foster children. Furthermore, it may be beneficial to investigate if such information influences the formation of empathy and/or sympathy within the teacher for the child and, if so, how this impacts the foster child’s educational outcomes.

Uniquely, but clearly indicated in this study was a tendency for teachers to act as a support to the foster child in a relationship that resembled that of a counselor and a client more than that of a typical teacher and a student. Teachers seemed to gauge their level of success with a foster child on the quality of their bond more than on the child’s academic performance. Perhaps this occurred because this child’s behavior improved once a bond was formed; however, more research is needed to determine if this bond
leads to improved academic performance. It would also be interesting to see if improved behavior is sustained once the child ages to the next grade or is moved to another school.

**Suggestions for Improving Support to Teachers with Foster Students**

While it may violate the confidentiality rights of students in foster care, it seems that teachers greatly desire to know additional information surrounding a child’s foster care status. Teachers indicated that knowing additional information helped them to better interact with the foster students, assisted them in developing a working relationship, and improved their ability to provide appropriate accommodations in the classroom. This suggests that, perhaps instead of maintaining confidentiality and withholding this information, teachers may benefit from disclosure of this information and choosing to enter into a confidentiality agreement themselves. Furthermore, schools should collect frequent and descriptive behavior monitoring data of all students, but in particularly for those students with more intensive needs, such as youth who live in foster care. Collecting this data and including it in school records would benefit all of the foster child’s future teachers by giving them a baseline for behavioral intervention and progress monitoring.

Many teachers described instructional changes made in order to benefit students living in foster care. While participants in this study appeared to be highly skilled, all teachers could likely benefit from dissemination of information regarding the best ways to establish a baseline of academic skills, accommodations and/or modifications that may be necessary, and general guidelines of how to interact with students in foster care (i.e., with honesty, patience, and empathy). Additionally, many teachers recounted acting as a
counselor to students in foster care by listening to foster students’ stories, validating them, and encouraging them to overcome their hardships. While these interactions were described as beneficial, they indicate various aspects in need of improvement. First, teachers could benefit from training in how best to maintain appropriate relationships with students in foster care. Furthermore, they may benefit from education in basic counseling skills that can be utilized when the foster student is looking to them for comfort and/or advice. Finally, students in foster care likely need increased access to school-based mental health services. While it may not be financially or logistically feasible for all schools to implement the Cognitive Behavioral Interventions for Trauma in Schools (CBITS) program, doing so would accomplish the three aforementioned suggestions (Jaycox, 2009).

Finally, school systems and social service agencies should work to promote increased collaboration. Social service agencies should educate school systems about the foster care process and, likewise, school systems should educate the agencies about educational services available to foster students. The two entities, as well as foster parents, could benefit the foster child by meeting—at least once—whenever the child enrolls with a new teacher. It could also be beneficial for schools to establish a point person for foster children, which would likely be a school-based mental health professional (i.e. school psychologist, guidance counselor). This individual should work to keep all parties informed of the foster child’s needs, as well as take charge of scheduling inter-agency meetings. Through meeting on a regular basis, schools, foster
parents, and social service agencies could exchange information, establish common goals, and plan for a brighter future the foster child.

**Conclusion**

The present study investigated the experiences, struggles, and needs of teachers when addressing the challenges that students who live in foster care present. The findings suggested that teachers have a strong desire to know more background information about students and wish for more collaboration between foster homes, the school, and social service agencies. Additionally, some participants recognized the social-emotional and behavioral struggles of foster children and suggested individual and/or small-group counseling be provided to them at school.

This study is important to the current literature because it confirms previous findings regarding teachers’ experiences working with students who live in foster care (Palladino, 2006; Zetlin et al., 2012). Additionally, it helps to fill the gap highlighted by Zetlin and colleagues (2012) regarding the support teachers believe they need in order to best serve the foster care population. The findings point to a need to provide more detailed background information to teachers that includes factors that may influence a student’s behavior and the interventions implemented to improve that behavior. Moreover, findings suggest school systems and social service agencies need to improve their collaboration in order to better support the teachers of foster students and, thus, the outcomes for children living in foster care.
REFERENCES


CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

• TITLE OF THE STUDY:

Teachers’ Experiences Working with Students in Foster Care

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by Keilah Stevens, a school psychology graduate student from the University of Dayton. Your participation in this study is voluntary. Please read the information below, and ask questions about anything you do not understand, before deciding whether or not to participate.

• PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The study will investigate the experiences, struggles, and needs of teachers of students living in foster care.

• PROCEDURES

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked questions about your experiences with students who live in foster care. Your specific answers will not be shared with anyone else. Your responses will remain anonymous and no information will be shared in reports or presentations that would allow anyone to personally identify your responses. The interview will take place at a time and location which is at your convenience, in person. The interview should take approximately 45 minutes to complete.

• POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

During the course of your participation in this study, you will be interviewed about your experiences with students who live in foster care. You may experience mild anxiety when recalling struggles or decisions you made with these students.

• ANTICIPATED BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS
There are no direct benefits to you, however, by participating in this research, you will help develop understanding of supports for teachers of students who live in foster care. This information could help other educators, administrators, and policy makers develop a framework by which schools can meet the needs of the vulnerable foster child population.

**PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION**

You will receive a $10 gift card in appreciation of your participation.

**CONFIDENTIALITY**

When the results of the research are published or discussed in conferences, no information will be included that would reveal your identity without your permission. The interview process and your responses will be audio-recorded for later analysis, and your identity will be protected or disguised. Your name will not be revealed in any document resulting from this research. Your data will be recorded anonymously. A pseudonym will be recorded with your data; your name or other identification will not be recorded with the data. When the research thesis is completed, the audio-recordings will be destroyed.

**PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**

Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you choose not to participate, that will not affect your relationship with the University of Dayton or other services to which you are otherwise entitled. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time without prejudice or penalty. The researcher may also terminate your participation in this research if she feels this to be in your best interest.

**IDENTIFICATION OF RESEARCHER**

If you experience any kind of discomfort as a result of your participation in this study, or if you have questions about the research, contact Keilah Stevens (primary researcher) at 740-412-7169 or keilah_stevens@plsd.us

**IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS**

If you have any questions about this research, please contact Keilah Stevens, primary researcher and graduate student at keilah_stevens@plsd.us or Susan Davies, Ed.D., Thesis Chair and Associate Professor with the University of Dayton at 937-229-3652 or sdavies1@udayton.edu.

**RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS**

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, you may contact the
SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

I have read the information provided above. I have been given an opportunity to ask questions and all of my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I have been given a copy of this form. In signing this form, I certify that I am eighteen years of age.

Name of Participant (please print) _________________________________

Address________________________________________________________

Signature of Participant ______________________________________ Date _____

SIGNATURE OF WITNESS

My signature as witness certifies that the Participant signed this consent form in my presence.

Name of Witness (please print) ____________________________________________

Signature of Witness ______________________________________________ Date ________
APPENDIX B

Demographic Information

Please complete this questionnaire and return it to the interviewer. If you have any questions, please ask them. All information that you provide will be kept confidential.

1. **Current Teaching Assignment**: (check all that apply)
   - ___ K
   - ___ 1
   - ___ 2
   - ___ 3
   - ___ 4
   - ___ 5
   - ___ 6
   - ___ 7
   - ___ 8
   - ___ 9
   - ___ 10
   - ___ 11
   - ___ 12
   - ___ General Education
   - ___ Special Education

2. **Years of Teaching Experience**
   - _____ Years of teaching
   - _____ Years in current assignment

3. **What subjects and grade levels have you taught?**
   - ____________________________________________________________
   - ____________________________________________________________
   - ____________________________________________________________
APPENDIX C

Interview Protocol

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question type</th>
<th>Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introductory comments</td>
<td>“Thank you for your willingness to participate in this interview with me. My name is Keilah and I am an intern school psychologist. As you know from our emails, I am completing a thesis project that seeks to gain knowledge about teachers’ experiences working with children who live in foster care. Your participation today is voluntary and you can stop the interview at any time. All I ask is that you provide honest answers and I am looking forward to hearing about your experience. Do you have any questions before we begin?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opening introductory</td>
<td>“To begin, will you please fill out this demographic sheet regarding your teaching assignment?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“To your knowledge, do you currently have a child who lives in foster care in your class?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>If answer is no: “Have you had a student who lived in foster care in class in the past?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition</td>
<td>“Tell me about your experience with that student or students.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Please describe any challenges that arose in relation to this student being in your class.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key</td>
<td>• “How did you learn that the student is/was living in foster care?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• “What support, if any, did the school provide to you to help deal with those challenges?”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• “What supports, services, or training do you believe would help you (or other teachers) be more effective with students in foster care?”

Ending

“Is there anything I’ve missed that you would like to share regarding your experience with foster children?”

Conclusion

• In 2-3 minutes, briefly summarize the main points of the interview and ask if the summary is accurate.
• When summary is completed, say, “Is there anything I’ve missed that you would like to share regarding your experience with foster children?”
• Once additional comments are addressed say, “Thank you for participating in this interview with me. Please accept this gift card as a token of my appreciation.”