Elementary Classroom Teachers’ Perceptions of and Lived Experiences with Children in Foster Care: 
A Qualitative Study

Dissertation

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By

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Abstract

The literature describing the academic performance, school experiences, and social relations of children in foster care is fraught with negative findings regarding educational delays, high attrition in high school, and inadequate social skills, as well as inability to maintain employment, incarceration, and homelessness in young adulthood. Such findings could influence classroom teachers to stereotype them intellectually, behaviorally, and psychosocially, and to expend little time and effort to help foster children. To investigate elementary classroom teachers’ perceptions of and lived experiences with foster children the researcher used a grounded theory strategy and methods. Twenty-five teachers from three urban school districts in a Midwestern state were interviewed one-on-one according to a semi-structured interview schedule. Each interview was audio taped and transcribed verbatim. The constant comparative method was used to analyze emergent data and construct themes. The final stage of analysis yielded the following themes: 1. Participants’ empathy for children in foster care, 2. Participants’ impressions of foster parents, 3. Participants’ interactions within the system, 4. Foster care children’s academic performance, 5. Behavioral issues with children in foster care, 6. Foster care children’s interactions with peers, and 7. Participants’ advice to colleagues. Overall, results indicate that elementary school teachers did not stereotype children in foster care. Instead, they demonstrated a
balanced perspective on their abilities and challenges, and understood how their interactions and interventions as educators could support foster care children in their classrooms and enhance their development, academically and psychosocially.
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Chapter 1: Statement of the Problem

The number of children in foster care continues to increase (Orme & Buehler, 2001) with estimates of 500,000 to 710,000 children in care at any one time (Bruskas, 2008; Buehler, Orme, Post, & Patterson, 2000; Hussey & Shenyang, 2005; Jamora et al., 2009; Kaplan, Skolnik & Turnbull, 2009; McNaught, 2004). Neglect, physical and sexual abuse, domestic violence, homelessness, parental substance abuse, and parental mental illness may precipitate the placement of a child into foster care (Kools, 1999; Newton, Litrownik, & Landsverk, 2000). Houston and Adeoye (2010) describe foster care as a safety net for abused and neglected children while Shlonsky and Berrick (2001) state that the basic premise for the use of foster care is that foster care provides children with a safe, normal family experience in those areas that abused and neglected children have not experienced normalcy. Jamora et al. (2009) describe foster care as “a less restrictive community setting” (p.199) for children whose severe mental health issues may have required placement in a residential treatment setting. Furthermore, Zetlin, Weinberg, and Kimm (2003) state “abused and neglected children, particularly those who must be removed from their parents’ custody and placed in foster care, are at tremendous risk educationally” (p. 105). Youth placed in the foster care system experience numerous academic difficulties, delays in math and reading achievement, behavioral problems, and mental health issues including loss and grief, anger and depression, as well as a sense
of abandonment (Christiansen, 1997; Colton & Heath, 1994; Kools, 1999; McCrae, Lee, Barth, & Rauktis, 2010; Rosenfeld & Richman, 2003; Rutter, 2000; Zetlin et al., 2003; Zima et al., 2000).

A primary experience that remains constant for every child before, during, and after foster care placement, however, is the educational experience. According to Starkey (2003), “school is often the only source of stability in a foster child’s life” (p. 4). Foster care children, like all children, spend a significant amount of their day in the classroom. The classroom experience provides a predictable structure and consistency, which in turn impacts the on-going psychosocial development, educational outcomes, and the transition into adulthood of the foster child (Gustavsson, 1991; McNaught, 2004; Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2006; Nilsen, 2007).

Shireman (2003) and Mendes & Moslehuddin (2006) explain that when foster youth do not graduate they are often subjected to a lifestyle of poverty. When they do secure jobs, the jobs tend to be low paying jobs with poor benefits. As a result, these youth lack self-sufficiency and about 25% of these youth must depend on public assistance. According to Smucket and Kauffman (1996), “children in foster care have been found to be placed in special education about three times more often than children in the general population (p. 31). Additionally, while foster children are over-represented in special education, they also have higher rates of absenteeism, receive more referrals for discipline problems, and experience higher rates of retention (Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2006; Stone, D’Andrade, and Austin, 2007; Zetlin et al., 2006; Zetlin et al., 2010).

The school and the classroom play an important role in the life of foster
children. The schools can make a difference for youth as the schools provide a pathway for achievement, self-esteem, and self-worth (Dent, 2003; Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2006). According to Starkey (2003), “positive relationships with supportive teachers can offer a measure of protection from the disruption and uncertainty associated with out-of-home placement” (p. 5). Furthermore, a child’s success as an adult is often influenced by that child’s successful navigation of the educational system. According to Christian (2006), positive relationships with teachers and a supportive educational experience can help children in foster care feel sheltered from the trauma that originally brought them into the system.

Children entering the foster care system immediately have the label of foster child. They also quickly receive additional labels including abused, neglected, behavioral problem, and offender (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2010). Parents and teachers often do not recognize that foster children’s lives are immensely influenced by multiple systems including the family, neighborhood, school, public children agencies, the values and norms of family and society, and public policy. According to Zetlin, Weinberg, and Shea (2006), “these systems typically operate separately even though the actions of each affect the same children’s lives” (p. 166). Because of the relationships and ongoing interactions of these systems, the psychosocial development of the foster child is affected at every stage. Research has shown that children in substitute care academically function one to two years behind peers who live with their birth families (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Kimm, 2003). A continual decline in a child’s educational experience will affect the child’s ability to become a successful adult. Altshuler (1997) and Zetlin et al. (2006) note that children in foster
care are those most at risk of any children in the classroom. And, according to Martin and Jackson (2002) and Zetlin et al. (2010), youth in foster care often leave the system without a high school diploma, are 13 times more likely to have a special education title, and are at greater risk for exclusion than children who are not in the system.

During a child’s time in substitute care, teachers and foster parents spend the most time with the foster child. Since the majority of a child’s day-time hours consist of being in school and engaging in school related activities, it would seem that the expectations of the classroom teacher would significantly influence the educational experience of the foster child. As a result, classroom teachers and the school environment can have an important impact on the child’s emotional and intellectual development. As Brooks and Goldstein (2001) have observed, children enjoy school and learn best when they feel that their teachers and the educational system care about them.

Many children in foster care have not had a positive education experience and “broken schooling, low expectations and low self esteem are pathways to education failure” (Jackson, 2002, p. 33). As Sprague and Walker (2000) assert in Hester et al. (2004), “children will only be as good as the environment we provide them across settings and over time” (p. 7) and even teachers may actually support the negative behavior of a child. Birch and Ladd (1998) state that while it is understood that the peer relationship is very important within the school environment, the relationship between student and teacher is also very important. These relations affect the behavioral adjustment of the student. Therefore, the research question for
this qualitative study is: What are elementary classroom teachers’ perceptions of and lived experiences with children in foster care?

The researcher’s interest in this study emanated from her professional experience of elementary school children and her experience as a social worker in a foster care agency providing case management, clinical mental health services, and supervisory services to social workers, and finally, as a regional director in the foster care agency.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

The school and the classroom play an important role in the life of foster children, and often their success in adulthood is influenced by their successful navigation of the educational system. Many of the studies documenting the outcomes of children in foster care combine elementary and high school-age children. Children in foster care experience behavioral problems to a greater degree when compared to the general population, and more children in foster care repeat at least one grade (Rutter, 2000; Zetlin et al., 2006). Wulczyn et al. (2006) state that foster children have higher rates of behavioral problems whether assessed by teachers, parents, or themselves. According to Hartman (2006), as foster children are prone to greater mobility, he found that, “by the end of third grade, one in six children had attended three or more schools” (p. 20) and, as a result, suffers socially, academically, and emotionally. McNaught (2004) concurs with Hartman stating that by continually changing schools, the foster child in fourth grade is four months behind those students who are stable, and if this falling behind continues, the student will be one year behind other students by the time the foster care student reaches sixth grade. Hussey and Shenyang (2005) and Zetlin et al. (2010) further this discussion stating that the more out-of-home placements foster children experience, the more disturbed the behavior becomes.
According to Simon and Jackson (as cited in Jackson & McParlin, 2006), children living in foster care:

- are four times more likely than others to require the help of mental health services; nine times more likely to have special needs requiring assessment, support or therapy; seven times more likely to misuse alcohol or drugs; 50 times more likely to wind up in prison; 60 times more likely to become homeless; and 66 times more likely to have children needing public care (p. 90).

Lips (2007) writes that “school transfers can create gaps in the learning cycle in that these gaps force children to adjust to new classroom settings, teachers, and classmates, and cause children to lose social networks, peer groups, and relationships with adults. These changes can exacerbate the emotional instability and unrest caused by home transfers” (p. 3). Yu, Day, and Williams (2002) concur with Lips stating that children placed into foster care experience low academic performance with about a fourth of the children repeating at least one grade, and upwards of two thirds of the children performing below grade level in math and reading. These authors also stated that approximately 50% of the children that left foster care prior to graduation from high school did not complete their high school education.

Rosenfeld and Richman (2003) surveyed 1,209 middle school students between October 1996 and February 1997 to assess their perception of their receipt of three types of social supports. These social supports included “listening and emotional support, task appreciation and support, and personal assistance support” (p. 71). These students were identified in one of four categories as at-risk and in an
out-of-home placement; not at risk and in an out-of-home placement; at-risk; and not at risk. An analysis of the information concluded that “students in out-of-home placement perceive receiving less teacher support than students not in out-of-home placement” (p. 79) and “students in out-of-home placement reported poorer attendance than did students not in out-of-home placement” (p. 80). “Students in out-of-home placement perceived receiving less friend support than students not in out-of-home placement” and “students in out-of-home placement perceived receiving less parent/adult caretaker support than students not in out-of-home placement” (p. 80).

Zima, et al. (2000) conducted a study on 302 randomly selected foster children ages six through twelve years of age. They found that just over:

one-third of the children had attended two or more different schools, and the number of changes ranged from zero to nine. Furthermore, 12% had repeated at least one grade. Of the 12% repeating one grade, an additional 16% had repeated more than one grade. Fourteen percent of the 302 children had received either one suspension or expulsion and of this group more than half had been suspended more than once (p. 95).

Zima et al. (2000) also found that “69% of the children screened positive for a behavior problem, academic skill delay or school failure” (p.95). A relationship also existed between those children who scored in the clinical range for internalizing, externalizing, and total behavior problems and the number of suspensions and expulsions. “Placement instability was significantly related to academic skill delays” (p. 97) and “severe academic skill delays were disproportionately high among the
According to Smucker, Kauffman, and Ball (1996), “children in foster care have been found to be placed in special education about three times more often than children in the general population” (p. 31). Many of these foster care students were placed in special education classes for children with emotional and behavioral disorders. When five groups of children in foster care and non-foster care were observed, the same researchers found that children in foster care were more likely to be retained than those in the non foster care population, and negative comments by teachers included comments about immaturity, behavioral problems, and emotional problems. These same children in foster care actually experienced more behavioral and academic problems, had a higher rate of mobility, multiple school placements, and higher retention rates than those students not in foster care. Overall, the children in the foster care groups were perceived more negatively by the classroom teachers than their non-foster peers.

Smucker, Kauffman, and Ball (1996) studied four groups of children and teens ages 5 – 18, that had been divided into four groups labeled foster care and emotional disorders (FCED), foster care (FC), emotional disorders (ED), and neither (N). Each group was comprised of the same number of students, same number of boys and girls, and contained the same number of Caucasian and African American children. Researchers used school records and interviews to determine the potential existence of school related issues among the four groups of students (p.32). Results indicated that: “Children in foster care were moving from school to school more frequently than students in the other groups” (p.34). The results also concluded that:
“foster care emotional disorders differed significantly from group emotional disorders; it seems clear that foster care, not emotional behavioral disorders, was the most influential factor in this analysis” (p. 34).

In the study mentioned above, interview data was acquired on all but one of the students. When analyzing the interview information Smucker et al. stated:

Because negative comments are subjective and Group FCED differed significantly from the other three groups, a qualitative analysis of the negative comments for the students was conducted. . . For Group FCED, comments tended to indicate more serious behavior problems, more immaturity, and excessive emotional needs (p.34).

The comments for Group FC also indicated adjustment problems, particularly in the area of social skills” . . . “All students in Group FC received negative comments” (p. 35). Smucker et al. further their discourse stating:

The data suggest that students in foster care are at risk for problems in school. These students are likely to move from school to school, have higher retention rates, and be perceived by school staff in a more negative manner. Many of the children experience significant problems with academic tasks. However, it is clear that students in foster care who were also classified as having EBD (emotional behavioral disorders) were at highest risk for academic and behavioral problems (p. 36).

Teens in foster care often function below average in math, reading, and vocabulary skills, and are less likely to complete GED programs or to graduate from high school (Blome, 1997). Teens often felt that their education was seriously affected because of moves from one foster home to another as they struggled to fit
into a new school, learn the educational culture of the school, and complete work that may have been missed during the time of the move to the new foster home (Curtis, Grady, & Kendall, 1999).

**Psycho-Social Issues**

In order to understand the potential impact of foster care placement on the psychosocial development of the school-aged child, it is important to understand the normal developmental milestones of children during the middle childhood years, that is, the elementary school years.

Berk (2010) and Swafford and Bryan (2000) state that the early school years through the teen years are the times that children further develop their cognitive and social abilities. During this time they are eager to learn new skills. They compare themselves to others, and when recognizing disparities between themselves and others, school age children may view themselves as inferior to others. They are dependent on caregivers and other significant adults during this process; particularly, they are dependent upon the classroom teacher. The classroom teacher has now replaced the parent for a significant amount of time each day. During this period, the classroom teacher is the person who now provides direction, support, and encouragement for an assignment well done or for appropriate behavior. Additionally, the teacher is the person who assists the student when assignments or behavior are not appropriate in the classroom.

For the child in foster care, caregivers and significant adults may change due to multiple placements. As a result of loss and grief issues, the child may no longer feel competent, may be angry, and may blame self for removal from a family.
Holman (2001) notes that the child may struggle with anger toward the birth parent and turn this anger toward the new family that is providing care or toward teachers and peers. The child may also turn this anger toward self and fall into a cycle of depression and hurtful behavior which spills into the classroom and impairs the child’s ability to focus on the educational process. This impact may include lowered self-esteem, refusal to participate in classroom activities, inability to bond with teachers and peers, and a general questioning on one’s own personal integrity. The child that feels rejected by family may also experience peer rejection, engaging in inappropriate behaviors which negatively influence educational achievement (McEvoy & Welker, 2000). As a result, the child may be informally labeled as a troublemaker or may be assessed and formally labeled as an emotionally and behaviorally disturbed child.

Wulczyn et al. (2006) described children in foster care as exhibiting inferior academic achievement when compared with children that have not been abused and neglected and that are not in foster care. Abused and neglected children often perceive their family in a negative manner and may have had to take on parental roles in the birth family. School-aged children coming into foster care may not have had the opportunity to develop peer relationships and may not have learned to regulate behavior. At this age, learning to regulate behavior often happens within the context of peer relationships.

During middle childhood or elementary school, school provides a routine for children; and, particularly for foster children, this is a routine that is consistent as children move from one foster home to another foster home. During this time,
children struggle to achieve a sense of mastery over their environment by increasing their social, academic, personal, and physical competencies. Friendships are important, and friends provide recognition and support as they work along side each other, encourage each other to try new things, and affirm each other when things go well. Friendships also afford children with a sense of identification with another person who is similar to themselves. Being a part of a group is very important to children during the elementary period (Berk, 2010; Davies, 2004).

The middle childhood or elementary school period is a time when children begin to feel that they are participating in the adult world because they are accomplishing things. According to Erikson, (as cited in Berk, 2010) children begin to feel a sense of accomplishment, feel they are developing a sense of having a part of society, and playing a role in the real world. During this time, there is an emphasis on production and accomplishments. Students attain the pleasure of work and satisfaction in doing something well. The primary task of the middle childhood or elementary school period is developing a sense of industry. When the student is not able to be successful and is not able to develop a sense of industry, then the student feels inferior, and views self as unworthy, inadequate, and incompetent.

For the child in foster care, the middle childhood or elementary school period may be a time of great struggle and may end with the child feeling inferior and less significant than his / her classmates. Moving from foster home to foster home often makes children feel inferior and may decrease or even suppress their motivation to be industrious in the classroom setting. The lack of consistency and stability makes it difficult to maintain friendships in school and compromises the ability to develop
peer relationships. With an emphasis on production and accomplishments, foster children feel estranged and frustrated in not being able to develop friendships, knowing the importance friends play in each other’s life during this time of development. Foster children are influenced by unstable environments and miss many days of school because of transitions from home to home. While other children are learning to help each other and are developing an aptitude for prosocial and altruistic behavior, foster children may be consumed with their own frustrations when not feeling accepted and productive in the classroom (Bruskas, 2008; Davies, 2004; Strijker, Knorth & Knot-Dickscheit, 2008).

Another critical milestone for children during the elementary school period is that they recognize how their family has prepared them for the structure and business of the classroom. “When he [foster child] finds out that the background of his parents rather than his wish and will to learn are the factors that decide his worth as a pupil, the human propensity for feeling unworthy may be fatefully aggravated as a detriment of character development” (Erikson, 1968, p. 124). Bruskas (2008) confirms that, as a result, the foster child often transitions from the middle childhood or elementary stage to the adolescent stage with a low self-esteem, a diminished sense of self-efficacy, and a diminutive sense of self-worth.

Children and teens suffer many losses when placed into foster care; and the greatest loss, even if temporary, is the loss of the birth family. This is particularly keen for minority children as they lose, in addition to the birth family, the relationship with their extended family (Curtis et al., 1999). The loss of friends, schoolmates, neighborhoods, even toys and pets, are some of the losses felt by
children and teens being placed into foster care (Strijker et al., 2008). Often they may not even have time to pack their favorite belongings and clothing when they are placed into foster care.

As a result of placement into foster care, the emotional and behavioral turmoil, and the pursuing difficulties within the educational system, children in foster care assume many labels that reflect their behavior and their self-images.

**Labeling Theory**

The records of foster children include numerous labels and supposedly serve the purpose of presenting a comprehensive profile of the child. To understand the potential impact of labeling on the child one must first understand the premises of labeling. The concept of labeling theory surfaced during the 1950’s and 60’s and was used as a means of explaining deviant behavior. According to O’Connor (2007), Tannenbaum was considered the first labeling theorist, as he was concerned with explaining the existence of malice or wrong-doing. He argued that the practice of classifying, naming, describing, or categorizing any individual for particular treatment becomes a way of stimulating and calling to mind the very traits about which others are complaining. His foundational assertion was that “a person becomes the thing they are described as being” (p.1). In other words, developmentally and functionally, labeling can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

O’Connor asserts that others regarded Howard S. Becker as the actual founder of labeling theory (2007). Becker’s assumption was that certain behaviors were labeled delinquent as a means of criminalizing and then outlawing the behavior. Becker’s idea was that “being a criminal becomes a person’s master status. It
controls the way they are identified in public” (p. 2), and “an identity change takes place where the person’s self-concept loses any further stake in conformity” (p. 2). O’Connor credits Becker with the notion that a deviant self-image can lead to consistently deviant behavior. Additionally, Becker (1963) was concerned that persons could be falsely accused of the deviant behavior because of biases about race, gender, and even class. Becker’s concern of false accusation was reinforced by Quinney, 1970; Schur, 1980; Gove, 1980 (as cited in Heimer and Matsueda, 1994) when they stated “official labels are not distributed uniformly across the social structure, but rather are more likely to be applied to disadvantaged members of society” (p. 372).

Wolfson (1984) and Becker (1963) asserted that labeling theory explains the interaction between the person and the society or the environment in which the person exists. Sullivan and Wilson (1995) define labeling as an interaction between groups and/or individuals during which “public discrediting” (p. 4) of the identified individual results. According to Sullivan and Wilson, public discrediting is dangerous to the extent that it can exclude opportunities to engage in ordinary activities. Labels can be of a descriptive, behavioral, or status nature and labels can be either formal or informal (Adams & Robertson et al., 2003, Downs & Robertson, 1997, Wolfson, 1984). Labeling theory is often aligned with issues of juvenile delinquency and deviant behaviors. Bernburg (2006) observed, “the labeled person is thus increasingly likely to become involved in social groups that consist of social deviants and unconventional others” (p. 68). Bernburg (2006) further asserted:

Labeled teenagers may become aware of stereotypical beliefs in their
communities, or they may think that these beliefs exist based on their learned perception of what people think about criminals: fearing rejection, they may withdraw from interaction with conventional peers (p. 69).

Matsueda (1997) stated that “labeling theory argues that initial acts of delinquency are relatively harmless instances of primary deviance. From the standpoint of the child, such acts are defined as play or mischief; however, from the standpoint of the larger community, they are viewed as evil or as a law violation” (p. 1588). The community labels the child as bad and then “the label in turn, influences the self-image of the child, who comes to view him or herself as bad or delinquent, which in turn increases the likelihood of future deviance” (Matsueda, 1997, p. 1588). Matsueda firmly held that “a hallmark of labeling theory is the proposition that deviant labels are not randomly distributed across the social structure, but are instead more likely to apply to the powerless, the disadvantaged, and the poor” and “the result is self-fulfilling prophecy” (p. 1588).

Many labeling theorists maintain that labeling the offender has unanticipated negative consequences which serve to intensify the criminal behavior. Various authors have written that when teens are labeled as juvenile delinquents or as deviants, the occurrence of delinquent behaviors increase and the label becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy (Matsueda, 1992; Wolfson, 1984). Matsueda considered the idea of self-fulfilling prophecy as a “hallmark of labeling theory” (p. 1588) and was apprehensive too, that, “deviant labels were more likely to apply to the powerless, the disadvantaged, and the poor” (p. 1588). Heimer and Matsueda (1994) likewise asserted that “One’s reflected appraisals of self as a delinquent are affected by the
actual appraisals (or labels) made by significant others, like parents, teachers, and peers” (p. 366). In short, children are aware of the appraisals that others make of them and in a variety of ways children reflect on the impact they experience because of the label, and respond accordingly. According to Brezina and Aragones (2004), “labeling can unintentionally increase the likelihood of further delinquent involvement” (p. 514). Brezina and Aragones state the labeling alters the “personal identity” (p. 514) because when significant others share the opinion of those that are doing the labeling, the labeled person tends to internalize the status, and then to behave for that reason or in view of the label.

Every child that comes into foster care brings the label of foster child and knows that this makes him/her different from the majority of other children. In order to consider the impact of such a label, it is important to understand that labeling theory is concerned with “the dynamics of socially defining particular activities or people” (Wolfson, 1984, p. 73) and that labeling theory assumes “diversity and conflict rather than consensus” (Wolfson, 1984, p. 73).

Social workers, teachers, psychologists, and probation officers may assess foster youth and conclude their assessment with a formal label such as “learning disabled”, “oppositionally defiant”, or “emotional behaviorally disordered” while family and friends may categorize a child and give the child an informal label such as “delinquent” (Adams et al., 2003). Wolfson (1984) states that formal labels are considered more serious and persuasive because a professional determines the label, the label is recorded which gives the label a legal status, and the label will last over time. Continued assessments reinforce the label, which in turn determines the
person’s identity, and often the label is not effectively removed. Some persons feel that their freedom is lessened by the impact of the formal label and even after treatment, the label remains. Regardless of the reasons for formal labeling, many persons regard formal labels as deviant labels. Matsueda (1992) observed that “deviant labels are not randomly distributed across the social structure but are instead more likely to apply to the powerless, the disadvantaged, and the poor” (p. 1588). These groups often have less access to cultural, social, and material resources and are often more willing to accept these labels. As a result, these labels often alter their self-perceptions and, according to Matsueda (1992), the self-fulfilling prophecy begins. Wolfson (1984) concluded that “deviance or nonconforming behavior rises out of diverse sources and circumstances” (p. 76) such as doing poorly in school, exhibiting misbehavior, dysfunctional family issues, abuse and neglect, foster care, lack of stability, and delinquent peers. Eventually the continuation of the deviancy label has little to do with the origin of the issue but rather with the interactions with others.

“One of the ways an individual gains a deviant self-image is through labeling” (Wolfson, 1984, p. 79). As a result of the label, the person’s self-identity is now changed, either in a formal or informal manner and the person needs to assume the new and altered identity. According to Adams et al. (2003) labeling, whether positive or negative, can be the source of self-esteem for many children and teens. Ray and Downs (1986) supported this proposition noting that a youth given a label in response to engagement in a particular behavior or activity, consequently incorporates that label into his/her self-concepts. In order to further enhance self-
esteem, children and teens may then engage in more delinquent activity, violating rules, and getting into trouble (Matsueda, 1992). Adams et al. (2003) noted that the basic tenet of labeling theory is that as students perceive the negative social reactions from others, their self conceptions continue to become more negative. Adams et al. (2003) furthered this tenet by stating that when a label is given by a formal agency such as a court, a school, or a social service agency, the youth feels stigmatized and, in response, may engage in behavior that is more serious. This continued engagement in delinquent behavior contributes to the recidivism of the delinquent, which according to Meade (1974), is consistent with labeling theory.

Adams et al. (2003) and Wolfson (1984) hold that informal labels, given by friends, peers, and family may eventually fade away. Family and friends will make accommodations for informal labels and informal labels are often vague. Wolfson (1984) noted that labels usually are accepted as an explanation for abnormal behavior and as a result “evoke a conditioned reaction in us that allows us to discount or attack the label bearer, while our version of the world remains the same” (p. 62).

At some point in the educational process, foster care students often receive a label. It may be an informal label given by classmates or foster parents including labels such as slow, unmotivated, misbehaving, bad child, and problem student. Teachers refer the foster care student for assessments by which process the student may be given a formal label such as learning disabled, attention deficit disorder, emotionally disturbed, or behaviorally disturbed. According to Haring and Lovett (1992):
Labeling tends to lower the expectations of teachers who are delivering services to the special learner. The student is less likely to be treated normally; his or her opportunity for normal schooling is reduced and the main focus tends to be on the student’s weaknesses instead of his strengths (p. 6).

These labels have the potential to influence the teacher’s expectations of the student. Other teachers, parents, and even peers assume less of the student, and the student may never be challenged to meet more than basic expectations. The student may never reach his or her full potential because no one expects full potential. Formal labels such as learning disabled, emotionally disordered or behaviorally disordered are the trajectory to special education placement and follow the student throughout the academic years. According to McNaught (2004), “of the more than 500,000 children in foster care, approximately 30 – 40% are receiving special education services” (p. 35). As a result of labels, students feel they’re treated as outsiders, experience loneliness, feel segregated within the school environment, may experience a diminishment of the academic self-concept, and may never return to normal classrooms (Haring and Lovett, 1992; Ho, 2004; Leondari, 1993; Robinson, 1992; Wolfson, 1984).

Ho (2004) states that these labels “may produce negative expectations among the child’s teachers or even family members” (p.88). When comparing the self-concept of normal achievers, low achievers, and learning-disordered children, Leondari (1993) found that the learning-disordered students rated themselves more negatively on scales of self concept than did their normal and lower achieving peers,
even when their achievement levels were similar.

Labels given to a student by educational professionals often influence the interaction between the student and the teacher. According to Robinson (1992), teachers may seat students farther away from the teacher’s desk, may ask them to do less work, or may give more work, but the work is below the capability of the student. These same teachers may give students less eye contact, may discipline the student more often, and may even teach them at a lower level, such as using rote or drill teaching, while using higher levels of learning with students who do not have such labels. Students often have the same low expectations of themselves that their teachers have of them. These students receive lower grades, receive less praise, and often receive failing grades. According to Hester (2002), all of this may contribute to disciplinary problems.

The labeling process often impacts student behavior, and this behavior influences the working of the classroom. According to Birch and Ladd (1998), teachers prefer students whose behavior is cooperative, responsible, and guarded. Teachers do not favor students who are disruptive and assertive. Teachers’ perceptions of students often mirror the attitude they show toward their students. According to Lewin, Nelson, and Tollefson (1983), “teacher preference for students is closely related to student behavior. High-achieving, highly-motivated, and socially-skillful children are favored by most teachers. Aggressive, outspoken, and disruptive children are frequently rejected by teachers” (p. 188). The teacher’s “attitudinal reaction” (p. 188) is determined by the teacher’s perception of the behavior rather than the actual behavior itself. Birch and Ladd (1998) found that
oppositional and defiant children, those children who break the rules, challenge the authority of the teacher, and upset the climate of the classroom are likely to have an adverse impact on the relationship between the teacher and the child. As a result, these children are the type of children with whom many teachers do not want to work nor have in their classrooms. Birch and Ladd (1998) also observed:

Studies have shown that, whereas close teacher-child relationships are associated with positive child outcomes, such as school liking, classroom participation and academic competence; conflictual teacher-child relationships are linked with negative outcomes such as unfavorable school attitudes, school avoidance, classroom disengagement, and poor academic performance (p. 395).

Brophy and Good (1974) and Wiggins (1989) found that the attitude of the teacher toward the student had much the same impact as did the expectations of the teacher toward the student. Having formed a particular attitude toward the student, the teacher then begins to treat the student in a meticulous and singular manner. The student knows when the teacher likes him or her and classmates correctly perceive this information. When the teacher dislikes the student, both the student and classmates also know this and respond to this knowledge. The student then responds to the teacher’s attitude, and, in fact, the student’s response continues to emphasize the teacher’s attitude. Students who know the teacher likes them will engage in behavior that increases the teacher’s preference for them, while students that feel rejected by the teacher continue to display behavior that increases the level of rejection from the teacher. Brophy and Good (1974) found that “students liked by
the teachers are more likely to benefit from positive expectation effects, while students disliked by the teachers are more likely to suffer from negative expectations results” (p. 125). Brophy and Good continued their discourse by stating that students for whom teachers have higher expectations do learn more because the teacher expects more, while those students for whom the teacher has lower expectations actually learn less. Teacher expectations have the potential for influencing student success by influencing the amount that the student learns and by influencing the student’s motivation to learn.

A teacher’s control or authority is easily eroded by students who continually disrupt the activity of the classroom. According to Wiggins (1989), this can lead to students receiving less academic support and continues to cycle as the students express frustration and react to the teacher’s lowered expectations. McEvoy and Welker (2000) found that:

A pattern of academic failure provides few opportunities for the student to receive positive reinforcement. From the failing student’s perspective, school then takes on aversive properties that increase the likelihood of escape, rebellion, uncooperativeness, and other negative behavior. This cycle often results in school failure, dropping out, and involvement in delinquent groups (p.132).

Wolfson (1984) found that behavioral problems were often the result of the interaction between the student and the teacher. According to Hester (2002), once the trajectory of behavioral problems begins to surface, the student is at even greater risk for negative interactions from family, peers, and teachers. Webb (1992) says that
when at-risk children begin school they often exhibit short attention span, are easily
distracted, and have much difficulty following directions. Inadequate academic
performance and poor communication and social skills will quickly demand early
intervention and with that begins the labeling process.

Students with emotional and behavioral problems are even more at risk in the
classroom. Many children in foster care have multiple and severe mental health
problems. They have increased levels of psychiatric disorders as a result of the
effects of abuse and neglect, the results of the trauma of the violence and dysfunction
within their birth family, and the result of the perceived feeling of rejection by the
birth family (Christiansen 1997; Hussey & Shenyang 2005; Kupsinel & Dubsky,
1999; McEvoy & Welker, 2000). Children living in neglectful, abusive and
dysfunctional families develop inadequate skills to manage the stress of day-to-day
living. According to Webb (1992), depression, impulsive behavior, anxiety, and
feelings of rejection characterize these children. These children may also experience
low self-esteem, identity confusion, and a low tolerance for stress and
disappointment. Sutherland and Morgan (2003) state:

Behavior is often the by-product of multiple factors working together. A
child’s problem behavior may be the result of growing up in poverty, living
in violent neighborhoods, engaging in substance abuse, being taught through
ineffective academic instruction, being on the receiving end of punitive
school disciplinary policies or some combination of any or all of these factors
(p. 32).

Nelson and Roberts (2000) and Lane, Wehby, and Barton-Arwood (2005) affirm that
teachers respond in a more negative manner to students exhibiting disruptive behavior who were also diagnosed with emotional and behavioral disorders than to students not labeled with emotional and behavioral disorders. When comparing teacher response to students diagnosed with emotional and behavioral disorders and those not diagnosed, teachers used reprimands and disciplinary action more often when responding to the disruptive behavior of the diagnosed student. Soodak and Podell (1994) noted that students who are difficult to teach present a particular struggle for the classroom teacher.

McEvoy and Welker (2000) found that to the degree that children begin their educational experience with aversive behaviors acquired at home, such social skill deficits will shape their ability to attend to and to execute academic expectations. According to Farmer and Cadwallader (2000), “Beginning as early as the preschool years, children with problem behavior interact with others in ways that create a social context that sustains continuity in their behavior patterns” (p. 106).

Students in the academic arena may be labeled by several different groups of persons. Peers may label the student as nice or as mean, while teachers may label the student as unmotivated, uncaring, underachieving, or difficult to teach. According to Sapon-Shevin (1999), labels in school have an effect on both the opportunities for students and their successive performance in the classroom. The labels teachers allot to students influence how the teachers identify classroom events and in turn how they react to the students. When a teacher asks for support outside the classroom, the student often receives a formal label and is placed in a special education classroom (Kagan, 1990; Levin, Arluke, & Smith, 1982; Soodak & Podell,
Smucket and Kauffman (1996) report that large numbers of children in foster care receive special education services as the result of having a primary diagnosis of emotional and behavioral disorders. They note that “children in foster care have been found to be placed in special education about three times more often than children in the general population” (p. 31).

Once the student has been identified with a particular label, a teacher tends to adjust his or her thinking and anticipation of the student’s behavior so that the student mirrors the label. The result of labels is that the student’s inappropriate behavior is reinforced by peers and reacted to by parents who sanction consequences. Wolfson (1984) states “that social reaction to school behavior is uniformly negative and extends into the home and leisure time” (p. 55).

According to Farmer and Cadwallader (2000), even when students move from one school to another or even to a different classroom, they are able to seek out and meet peers that have similar behaviors. The same researchers found that aggressive children unite with other aggressive children, while non-aggressive children tend to join together with other non-aggressive children. This finding is consistent with Bernburg’s finding (2006) that a person that has been labeled is more likely to join the social groups of others who have the same label.

Family trauma and poverty often contribute to violent and aggressive behavior in children. A challenge for teachers according to Van Acker, Grant, and Henry (1996) is that, while this behavior is inappropriate in the school setting, it is often learned and sanctioned in the family setting. According to Hussey and Shenyang (2005) and McGuire (1989), when teachers consider such youth to be
delinquent or behaviorally disturbed, this then becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy for the youth. It can be difficult for teachers to understand students who come from a background different from that of the teacher, as many at-risk youth in the classroom come from families in which there is a history of criminal incarceration, mental illness, and homelessness.

It can be even more difficult for the teacher to understand and appreciate the quandary of the student in foster care. While many students in the classroom are involved in the family, neighborhood, and educational systems, students in foster care are involved in additional systems that may influence their behavior, the responses of the classroom teacher, and their peers.

Although much has been studied and written about the educational outcomes of children in foster care, and these outcomes attributed to multiple moves between foster homes and schools, educational delays and class retention, there has been minimal study of the classroom teacher’s perception of and experience with students in foster care.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Research Strategy

The proposed research was qualitative and adhered to a grounded theory strategy. This strategy seeks to construct mid-range theory rather than meta-theory. Mid-range theories are grounded in localized knowledge, that is the lived experiences and perspectives of actual persons in particular situations. Grounded theory begins with the collection of data that is analyzed in a specific manner including coding of the data, grouping data into categories, and using the categories to construct themes that generate a theoretical understanding of the studied experience. This strategy allows for more in-depth understanding of social issues and gives voice to marginalized persons in society. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) credit Charmaz as “a leading proponent of the constructivist approach to grounded theory” (p. 373). The authors say that “she (Charmaz) suggests that grounded theory consists of systematic inductive guidelines for collecting and analyzing empirical material to build middle-range theoretical frameworks that explain collected empirical materials” (p.373). Grounded theory will allow this researcher to investigate classroom teachers’ lived experience and perceptions of their students who are in foster care.

The specific grounded theory approach was a constructivist approach. Charmaz (2006) states that “a constructivist approach places priority on the
phenomena of study and sees both data and analysis as created from shared experience and relationships with participants and other sources of data” (p. 130). In this interpretive tradition “constructivists study how - and sometimes why – participants construct meanings and actions in specific situations” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 130). The constructivist approach allows for exploration and interpretation of statements and actions of the participant. This approach assumes that people create and preserve meaningful worlds by assigning meaning to their realities and acting in response to those assigned meanings. In this approach the researcher constructs an image of their reality through the refinement of the data. Charmaz (2000) observed, a “constructivist grounded theory seeks to define conditional statements that interpret how subjects construct their reality” (p. 523). In contrast, the objectivist approach sees data as factual, as static, and does not enter into the experience of the production of the data. “An objectivist grounded theorist assumes that data represent objective facts about a knowable world. The data already exist in the world; the researcher finds them and discovers theory from them” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 131).

Grounded theory constructivist methodology provides for an interaction between the participants and the researcher and can provide a means of resolving a main concern. In this research the main concern was the classroom teachers’ perceptions of and experiences with foster care students. Using the lens of labeling, this researcher analyzed the data to determine if teacher perception was an avenue of labeling, thus potentially influencing the educational process of children in foster care. The constructivist approach clearly places priority on the ongoing collection, analysis, and refinement of data which is extracted from the shared experience and
relationships with the interviewees. This approach accepts the fact that multiple teachers, each sharing her experiences with foster children, will provide a variety of truths based on their experiences and that the on-going review and refinement of multiples truths will allow for the emergence of theoretical assumptions about these experiences. The constructivist approach allows ongoing clarification of the multiple perspectives of the participants providing an interpretation of the realities of the teachers’ experiences.

The specific research question explored was “What are the classroom teachers’ perceptions of and lived experiences with children in foster care?” The questions for the semi-structured interview are outlined in Appendix B. The questions covered issues including academic performance of the foster child compared to other children; behavior of the foster child; how the foster child make friends; and how other students react to the foster child in the classroom. The researcher analyzed original data collected through individual interviews with elementary teachers and developed a thematic analysis of the data.

**Sampling**

The proposed research began with purposive sampling, an intentional process of choosing respondents based on their ability to provide the needed information (Padgett, 2008). Snowball sampling was used when participants’ colleagues contacted the interviewer and asked to participate. All participants met the established criteria as follows:

1. will have a minimum of two years experience teaching foster children
2. will be licensed teachers in Ohio
3. will voluntarily participate in this research project

The rationale for recruiting licensed teachers with a minimum of two years of experience teaching foster children was that first and second year teachers may not be oriented to other confounding issues experienced by more skilled teachers. New teachers may not yet be grounded in the culture of the classroom and may lack the lived experience needed to successfully understand the needs of their students. A minimum amount of experience ensured that teachers are not in a stage of adaptation to their new professional role.

**Recruitment of Participants**

In-depth face-to-face interviews were conducted with 25 elementary classroom teachers from a large urban school district and two smaller school districts. Padgett (2008) states that a sample size of 20 to 30 participants is fitting for a grounded theory strategy. This researcher disclosed to the participants that she is a doctoral student in the College of Social Work at The Ohio State University, and is conducting the interviews for the purpose of doctoral research and her dissertation.

The researcher initially met with the superintendent of one large urban school district and the superintendents of two smaller school districts in Northwest Ohio for the purpose of sharing the intention of this research process and gaining endorsement of and support for implementing the research process. With approval, a recruitment flier was posted in the teacher’s workroom in each school in the three identified school districts (See Appendix A). The interviewer provided a telephone number and an email address so that interested teachers could contact her. The identity of each participant remains anonymous on all research materials including
the interview transcript, the interview audiotape, and the report of research results. However, a master list of identifying information is being kept by the researcher in a locked cabinet in her office. Each participant was assigned a number and only that number was used to identify the interview and the data from the interview.

The rationale for selecting a large urban school district, and two smaller school districts, was that the school districts represent a diversity of students. This diversity is reflected in race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status of the students.

**Consent and Data Collection**

Teachers were asked to sign an IRB approved consent form before any interview began (See Appendix C for consent form). They had the opportunity to ask questions of the interviewer before signing. They were also told that their participation was voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw at any time without any penalty.

A pre-determined list of main questions in a semi-structured interview schedule was asked of each participant in order to fully explore the perceptions of classroom teachers and actual experiences with students who are in foster care. These questions are found in Appendix B.

All interviews with the classroom teachers were audio taped. After collecting basic demographic information including length of teaching experience, level of education, and gender, the researcher then proceeded using the main questions in Appendix B as a guide. Probing questions that can serve the purpose of clarifying participants’ responses, adding depth, or contrasting meanings were also asked (Padgett, 2008, p. 111). At times it was necessary to ask additional questions to get
the teacher to further explain his/her experience or to explore what the experience meant. Probing questions included; “How would you describe that” or “Could you give an example of that?” Two participants were called to clarify information. During each interview the researcher was also aware not only of the words of the participant, but also of the tone, facial expressions, posture, and body language, and noted this information in the field notes. This information became a part of the audit trail.

**Data Analysis**

Each interview was transcribed by an experienced professional transcriptionist who agreed to comply with the need for confidentiality. Each transcription was read thoroughly at least three times in its entirety by the researcher, and then coding methods were applied. “Coding means naming segments of data with a label that simultaneously categorizes, summarizes, and accounts for each piece of data” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 43). Charmaz states that the coding of data is first done by coding individual phrases, lines or segments of the data and then sorting and synthesizing larger amounts of data. Line by line coding provides the researcher with a new perspective on the data in that a label is applied to each line and the label allows for the simultaneous categorizing, summarizing, and accounting for each piece of data. This process allowed the researcher to begin to make analytic interpretation of the data. This researcher did not use any software to manage the data analysis. Rather, following the line by line coding and the coding of phrases and larger segments of the data, this researcher cut the pages into sections, taped each section to a 5x8 inch file card, and wrote the code in the upper right hand corner
of the card. This researcher then wrote the identifying number of the participant on each card in the event she wanted to review the original transcription or review a larger segment of information from the participant. These cards were first sorted on a large table according to the code, then by preliminary categories, followed by significant categories, and finally, by themes. (See Appendix D for Codes Early in Data Analysis.)

Following the line by line coding, focused coding is used to separate, sort, and synthesize larger amounts of data and to allow the researcher to focus further data collection. This process allows for the emergence of relevant themes that will be supported with excerpts from the transcripts.

Memo writing occurred throughout the data analysis process. Memos were written at a variety of times including when sorting cards, as categories and themes began to emerge, following an interview, or later when a particular thought came to mind. At times the memo was written as this researcher sorted cards according to codes. The memo may have been a phrase to remind the researcher of a piece of information someone else referenced. And some memos were written when this researcher was describing the process to another professional and he would make a fitting comment. This researcher also wrote memos regarding a particular emotional response to an interview, for example, to record a facial reaction, or a particular statement made by the participant following the interview. An example of this memo was when a participant who was escorting the researcher back to the school office said “Parenting is not easy for any of us.” He said this as he turned and walked away obviously still deep in thought after talking about the parenting of children in
foster care. It was as if he made this statement to himself. Each memo was labeled. Memos were used to resort the coded file cards as new categories were emerging, as themes began to emerge, to note comparisons of data between participants, and eventually the memos were used throughout the writing this paper.

Member checking, while a means of increasing trustworthiness, did not occur in this study. This researcher received permission to interview the participants during their teaching day with the understanding that she would meet only once with each participant due to their schedules and obligations to their students. Participants understood from the initial phone call that an interview could be approximately 60 – 90 minutes in length so they often chose to meet with this researcher before or after the school day, on their lunch period, or when their students were with other teachers such as gym, music, or art. Participants were asked if they wished to receive a copy of their transcript and all said no, that it was not necessary. However, many did express an interest in the findings and hoped that this researcher could email them the final product.

Throughout data analysis, the writing of memos allowed the researcher to discover and explore ideas, to compare data, to distinguish between major and minor categories, to explain how the categories are related, and to direct further data gathering. Each memo was labeled and, as Charmaz (2006), stated, provided the transition between data collection and writing drafts of the papers. When no new data were appearing that “spark new theoretical insights, nor reveal new properties of these core theoretical categories” (Charmaz, 2006, p.113) this researcher determined that saturation had occurred.
The constant comparative method was used to analyze data. The constant comparative method allowed the researcher to compare and contrast the data across participants, conditions, and environments; and to formulate comparisons at each level of work (Charmaz, 2006). In other words, the constant comparative method as applied to grounded theory means evaluating the views and experiences of different participants and comparing data in various parts of the transcripts.

In this research activity all interviews were audio taped. All interviews were immediately transcribed, read at least three times in their entirety, and then coding was done to prevent decontextualizing the data. All data was then coded line by line enabling the researcher to observe similarities and differences. Data was compared to data throughout each initial interview. After line by line coding was completed, focused coding was again used to compare between persons, between and within lines, and between sections of coded materials allowing for sequential comparisons.

Throughout the process this researcher documented comparisons and other emerging ideas or themes in the memos that were written. Making comparisons of the information and identifying gaps in the information was also documented in the memos. Analyzing the coded information may create additional questions for the researcher and when this occurred, these were also recorded in the memos. According to Charmaz (2006), memos are written “to render the data, to discover and explore ideas” (p. 84). She continues the description of memo writing by stating that the memo writing process allows the writer “to distinguish between major and minor categories and delineate how they are related” (p. 85). Charmaz (2006) also states that “the literature review and theoretical framework can serve as valuable
sources of comparison and analysis” (p. 165).

Following the line by line coding and focused coding, the transcribed material was organized by categories that arose from the line by line coding. The development of categories was then compared and analyzed against each other followed by additional memo writing. Major and minor categories began to emerge and were analyzed through memo writing. This researcher constantly compared the emerging categories with previous coding and information documented in the memos.

**Rigor**

It is critical that qualitative research demonstrates a high degree of integrity, legitimacy, and accountability, which are accomplished through rigor or trustworthiness (Padgett, 2008). According to Steinmetz “a trustworthy study is one that is carried out fairly and ethically and whose findings represent as closely as possible the experience of the respondents” (as cited in Padgett, 2008, p. 184). Padgett (2008) states the rigor of a qualitative study is achieved through the following criteria: “Credibility (“the degree of fit between respondent’s views and the researcher’s description and interpretations”); transferability (“the generalizability of the study’s findings”); (p.181).”

Triangulation of sites was one type of rigor employed in this study in that the researcher drew her sample from three school districts: a large, urban, public school district, a medium size urban public school district, and a smaller public school district. In this grounded theory study, the researcher interviewed 25 participants, a suitable number of participants according to Padgett (2008). Spending adequate time
with the participant also increases the trust level between the respondent and the researcher and decreases the opportunity for the respondent to not be candid (Padgett, 2008). This researcher noted the amount of time spent with each participant and the quality of the interview in the field notes. Time spent with the participant was time in the actual face to face interview and any follow-up time that may be face to face or a phone contact.

The process of auditing also enhances the rigor of the research. Lincoln and Guba state that “leaving an audit trail means adopting a spirit of openness and documenting each step taken in data collection and analysis” (as cited in Padgett, 2008, p. 191). Bowen (2009) states “the audit trail can enhance the rigor and transparency of qualitative research” (p. 305). The field notes are also a significant component of the audit trail. The audit trail is also critical, according to Padgett (2008), as a means of honesty on the part of the researcher so that others can validate the findings of the researcher. The audit trail documents the chronology of the research process, including what was done, how it was done, and what decisions were made. Immediately following each interview, the co-investigator withdrew to another location and recorded field notes. This researcher did field notes during different times; often immediately following the interview and then several days later while listening to the audio tape. This researcher also kept a list of “spontaneous thoughts” while walking or working at her desk and when remembering something, would grab a steno pad or sit at the computer and write. Field notes were also used to compare data in the transcripts to the notes that the researcher wrote, often to recall facial or physical responses as the participant was speaking. Many of the field
notes became memos when analyzing data. This researcher also had members of her
dissertation committee review her research to ensure proper procedures, strategies,
and data analysis.

**Limitations of the Study**

The majority of the participants were Caucasian women and 88% of the
participants held a Master’s Degree. A more diverse sample of teachers by race,
etnicity, gender, and level of education would likely enhance maximal variation.
Furthermore, the participants were recruited from urban school districts in a
Midwestern state. Suburban and rural schools were not sources of recruiting
participants. Therefore, transferability of findings is limited to urban districts in that
region of the country.

Additionally, the three school districts from which participants were drawn had
high rates of students classified as economically disadvantaged, as well as Black, Non
Hispanic and White, Non Hispanic. It is possible that school districts that have
student populations and, in particular, foster care children, who vary demographically
by socioeconomic status and race/ethnicity may yield different results.

As is typical of grounded theory studies, sample size is limited to 20 to 30
participants (Padgett, 2008). However, it remains to be seen if similar qualitative
studies on the same research question yield similar findings.
Chapter 4: Results

**Introduction**

Chapter 4 presents the findings of the face-to-face interviews conducted with a sample of 25 licensed elementary classroom participants for this grounded theory, qualitative study. The voluntary participants obtained by purposive and snowball sampling were recruited from three school districts: a large urban school district and two smaller school districts. The 25 participants interviewed represented 14 schools in the three districts. The researcher met with the superintendent of each district and explained the purpose of the research. After receiving written approval and support for this research, a flier outlining the criteria and requesting volunteers was posted in the participants’ common areas.

The use of 25 participants from 14 elementary schools in three school districts enhances the rigor of this study through the method of triangulation (Padgett, 2008). Triangulation allowed this researcher to compare the experiences of multiple participants across multiple school districts and multiple schools within each district.

The following table demonstrates the number of students in each district using the variable of average daily attendance and the percentage of economically disadvantaged students. As such, it reflects the diversity among school districts.
School Districts | Average Daily Attendance | Economically Disadvantaged
---|---|---
A | 22,277 | 76.6%
B | 4,033 | 80.8%
C | 5,707 | 41.0%

Table 1. School Districts / Average Daily Attendance / Economically Disadvantaged

The subsequent chart documents the racial/ethnic breakdown of all students in each school district for the school year of 2010-2011, the most recent information on the state school year report card (www.ode.state.oh.us/reportcardfiles/dist/o44909.pdf).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School District</th>
<th>Black, Non Hispanic</th>
<th>Asian or Pacific Islander</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
<th>Multi-Racial</th>
<th>White, Non Hispanic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>44.6%</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
<td>40.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>40.2%</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td>14.0%</td>
<td>42.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
<td>83.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Ethnicity of School District

The following chart documents the racial/ethnic breakdown of participants in this study’s sample.
Table 3. Racial / Ethnicity of Participants

There were no other racial / ethnic groups represented in this sample.

The following table depicts the educational levels of the participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Education</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor Degree</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master Degree</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Level of Education / Participants

It is apparent that the number of teachers (88%) who have a master’s degree is disproportionate to those who have a bachelor’s degree. Until 2011 teachers in Ohio were required to complete a master’s degree when renewing their teaching license. The master’s degree is no longer required, though teachers must still complete a specified number of hours of on-going education to renew the teaching license.
license. http://online.notredamecollege.edu/masters-education-degree/ohio-masters-
requirement-for-teachers/ downloaded 2-18-2013.

Twenty five participants taught a combined total of 408 years and the number
of years of teaching ranged from 4 to 37 years. The following table documents the
number of years of teaching among the 25 participants. Fifty-nine percent (n=15) of
the participants taught between 11 and 20 years. Five participants taught for 10
years or less, and one participant taught for 37 years. The remaining four
participants taught between 21 and 30 years.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of years of teaching</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4-10</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-20</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-30</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-40</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5. Years Teaching / Participants

Every participant knew that he/she had taught at least two children who were
in foster care. Many only gave an approximate number of foster children that they
had taught. Two participants knew that they had taught two foster children and two
other participants estimated that they taught at least 40 foster children. Often a
participant said that while she knew certain children were in foster care, at other
times she did not know the status of the students. One participant acknowledged that
many children were placed in foster care in the zip code area of her school and as a result she knew that almost every year she taught foster children. The following chart depicts the number of participants with the range of the number of foster children taught by the participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Students Taught</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2-10</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-20</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-40</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6. Number of Students Taught / Participants

The final chart depicts the age range of the 25 participants. Again, using the constant comparative method and comparing data within and across the age ranges, there were no specifiable differences in the responses of the participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>25-35 years</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36-46 years</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47+ years</td>
<td>3</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 7. Age Range / Number of Participants
Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

The specific research question explored in this qualitative study is: “What are the classroom teachers’ perceptions of and lived experiences with children in foster care?” A pre-determined list of main questions in a semi-structured interview schedule was asked of each participant in order to explore fully his or her perceptions and lived experiences with students in foster care. The questions covered issues including how foster children perform academically as compared to children not in foster care; how foster children behave; how foster children make friends; and how other students react to the foster child in the classroom. The specific open ended main questions of the semi-structured interview schedule were:

1. How do children living in a foster family perform academically when compared to children living with biological parents or parent?
2. How do foster care children in your classroom behave toward you?
3. How do other students act toward the foster child?
4. How do foster children make friends?
5. What experience have you had with foster care children and their families outside of the school setting?
6. What, in your opinion, would enhance the educational experience of foster children? (e.g. academically, socially, recreationally)
7. What is the level of involvement of the foster parent at school?
8. What advice would you give to another teacher who will have foster care children in the classroom for the first time?
The length of time to complete the audio taped face to face interviews with the study participants ranged from 60 to 90 minutes. During each interview the researcher took brief notes usually noting facial response or voice inflection. If the participant made statements after the recorder had been turned off or when walking away from the interview setting, those statements were also noted in the field notes. The majority of the interviews occurred in the classroom setting, though several were done in small offices. The initial three interviews were done in coffee shops but the background noise of the coffee shop made transcription of the tape more difficult. Following each interview the researcher retreated to a location, ordinarily her car, and wrote notes on the interview process. She also reviewed field notes either later the same day or the next day to add anything remembered after writing the initial field note. An example of this occurred when recalling a participant saying, “I’ve really been wanting to talk with someone about this.” This participant was referring to a former foster care student and the criminal activity the student had engaged in as an older teen. He recalled this student as a very needy student, wanting much attention yet very angry that he was in foster care. This participant described this student coming to school in dirty clothes, lacking basic hygiene, and exhibiting very poor social skills while living with birth family. However, when he was in foster care he was clean, had nice clothes, and was happy in school. Another memo related to school staff as foster parent. When this researcher returned to her field notes and the transcription of the interview, she noted the participant who acknowledged that a staff member in the school was also a foster parent also stated how that knowledge made a difference in the staff member’s style of relating to the
foster children. According to the participant, this staff member was more understanding of the children’s behaviors, the pain and loss experienced by the foster children because of their moves to new homes, what the foster child needed in order to be successful, and the reluctance of the foster child initially to trust the participant. At another time as this researcher was thinking about the data, she wrote a memo that said: “Teachers get it, they understand.” That memo also contained several statements including: “They understand trauma and loss,” and, “They interpret inappropriate behavior as means of coping with the anger about being in foster care.” These memos helped to construct the categories for sections of data analysis.

This researcher listened to each tape and then read each transcript in full a minimum of three times before beginning the coding process. There were always three to five days between the readings of each transcript. This time frame was used so that each review was approached in a fresh manner, trying to listen as if this was the very first time reading the transcript. After coding the first two transcripts, this researcher became aware that she had not asked each participant about disciplining of foster children in the classroom and the comparison to the disciplining of other children. In the remaining interviews and by phone calls to the earlier participants, this researcher added the issue of classroom discipline. Reviewing the data about behavior of the foster child this researcher found that information about discipline was also embedded in the data that described behavioral issues. These new responses were coded and the data was immersed into the coded data. Following the coding of the data, line by line, and phrase by phrase, 25 preliminary categories emerged. These preliminary categories included the following:
1. Participants as counselor, mom, constant person

2. Participants’ responses to children’s situation

3. Knowing reason for foster care placement

4. Foster parents do fostering for the money and don’t really care about the foster kids

5. Some foster parents go the extra mile

6. Participants understand foster children

7. Need for more training for foster parents and participants

8. Foster children have many needs: routines, structure, community resources

9. Welcoming new foster child

10. Participants give foster children a chance

11. Losses for the foster child

12. Lack of collaboration

13. Behaviors due to loss and lack of stability

14. Foster children have trust issues

15. Most common behaviors of foster children

16. Participants value communication

17. Lack of social skills

18. Difficulty with academics

19. Making friends

20. Poor social skills

21. Stealing, lying, and hoarding behaviors

22. Participants protect foster kids regarding behavioral issues
23. Participants help colleagues

24. Lack of cooperation from custodial agencies

25. Multiple delays – emotional, social, academic,

   After continuing the coding process and applying the constant comparative
   method of analysis, the 25 larger categories were moved to 11 significant categories.
   These categories were:

1. Participant perception of foster parent

2. Role of participant

3. Kids before / during / after foster care

4. Communication

5. Lack of knowledge / information: foster children, the system, children’s issues, needs

6. Foster parent involvement

7. Foster children’s behavior

8. Making / being friends

9. Foster children’s academics

10. Birth family environment vs. foster family environment – ensuing issues, dichotomous situation

11. Finding out child is in foster care

   At a more advanced stage of coding concomitant with reviewing the last three
   transcripts, a point at which saturation had occurred, the following seven themes emerged:

1. Participants’ empathy for children in foster care
2. Participants’ impressions of foster parents
3. Participants’ interactions within the system
4. Academic performance of children in foster care
5. Behavioral issues with foster care children
6. Foster care children’s interactions with peers
7. Participants’ advice to colleagues

Thematic Results

A review of the interview transcripts, the field notes, memos, and audiotapes indicated that participants understood the emotional needs of the foster child. Their understanding of the emotional needs and distress of the foster children is demonstrated in the discussion of the first emergent theme.

1. Participants’ Empathy for Children in Foster Care

Many of the classroom participants demonstrated through their affect and voice inflection, as well as their words, compassion for their students in foster care, as they appeared concerned with and understanding of the emotional and social needs of their students. Sounding very serious and taking a deep breath before she spoke, one participant stated, “How can they do well when they are so angry about being in foster care?” Another participant described her role when working with a child in foster care when she said, “I’ll ask someone else to watch my students so he [the foster child] can talk to me because I do feel he has to talk to somebody.” She continued by saying, “I think too, as a teacher you have to know them, regardless if you were going to have them for five minutes or nine months.”

It was common knowledge among the participants that children in foster care
often do not stay the entire school year and can move to another school with no notice. Participants understood that this move occurred for several reasons including reunification with birth family, move to a new foster home for various reasons including poor behavior, or placement into an adoptive home. Several participants reflected the need of the classroom teacher to know the circumstances of the foster child. At the same time, another participant displayed empathy for the foster child when she said, “I think he was in my room for maybe three weeks and then he was gone. You don’t know what types of situations those kids are going through. School is probably the last thing that’s on their mind.” She shook her head and opened her hands in a powerless manner as she spoke.

Several participants saw themselves as protectors who provided safety for children in foster care. One participant demonstrated this when she said, “I felt like protecting this kid. I didn’t want to get him in trouble. He did get in trouble in gym today and I wrote an after school detention. But he takes the bus so there would be no one to pick him up and he just went home.” Echoing the role of protector and an understanding of the emotional needs of the foster child, another participant assuredly stated:

I make sure it’s a very safe environment because what I have found, hands down, with children that have been in any foster situation is [that] they will literally not do a thing—communication wise or learning wise-unless they feel safe in the environment that they’re in. So many have been pulled into so many situations; and sometimes, unfortunately, the foster situation they’ve been put into hasn’t been a good one either. They need an adult to make
them feel safe.

Another participant reiterated the foster child’s need for safety saying, “Make them feel welcome, like it’s a place that they’re safe. I get the impression from some of my foster children maybe they weren’t in a safe environment and they need to feel safe!” She stressed the word “need” as if making sure that I knew they really need to feel safe. While participants often stated a desire to know more about the foster child’s situations and environment, one participant said, “It’s probably good I don’t know everything the child dealt with. Honestly, it probably would make me sick to my stomach to know.”

An additional participant demonstrated his understanding of a foster child’s emotional pain when he said, “Don’t be too hard on his behavior because he [foster child] already has grief in his life.” Echoing this same idea another said, “I know these kids are scared. Their rug has been pulled out from underneath them. They don’t know what’s going to happen tomorrow. And they’re just scared that everything they know is gone.” She continued this statement of fear by saying, “Foster kids have to be so scared! There must be such a lack of security. I mean, they’ve lost everything!” Another participant reflected this fear when she said:

Most of the time they come in very scared, but they latch on very quickly and that’s what you’ll see. That’s what I’ve seen with all of them. They make attachments very quickly because you’re the same person every day.

While participants spoke of their understanding of the trauma experienced by youth, one participant expressed that foster children may not trust the classroom teacher, as the classroom teacher is an adult and the foster child has often lost trust in
adults. Foster children experience adults as the ones responsible for removing the child from the birth home and placing the child into foster care. As a result, she said that she is diligent in:

- involving them by sitting the foster child with some kids that have some compassion, a higher level of thinking about their friend such as sitting next to the new friend [foster child] at lunch, and helping the foster child learn the routines of the classroom.

Another participant, in a very passionate manner, almost on the verge of tears, reiterated the lack of trust in the classroom teacher when she stressed:

I think it’s hard for them to learn to trust [the teacher] because kids who are in foster care have had them [parents] taken away from them [child] and whether you want to say it or not, their parents are important to them even if they did something to them that was so heinous to put them in a foster care situation. In my experience with foster care, they [foster children] still love, care, think about those parents and don’t truly understand why they’ve been taken away from them, put in a completely different situation, and I don’t think foster kids really value that this person [foster parent] is taking better care of them. They don’t know what they can trust; they don’t know what’s going to happen to them next. They’ve changed house, changed where they sleep, changed their school and everything about it, and they don’t know when the next change is going to happen.

The care and concern that teachers experience for the foster children was described by one participant when, after she related the success experienced by a
foster child. I asked if that foster child would return to her school following summer vacation. She said:

Honestly, I have no idea. I thought that he was going to be moved out of the current situation he is in now and that he would have to leave a couple months ago, and so I’m frankly just grateful to still have him. So I almost do it day to day [teach him]. I almost have to have the mindset that I can come in next week and he won’t be there. (She shook her head, looking down, appearing sad). And that’s hard. Because so many of us are very vested in him. So I would love it if he was here again next year. I would love it!

She related her experience of wanting the best for the foster child and the impact of her own behavior on another student, when she said:

I remember the first two weeks the child would never even look at anyone and would look at the ground and I remember it just broke my heart. And one day I discovered this child liked Spiderman and ‘Let me tell you’ I found every Spiderman, anything I could find and what was so sweet at Christmas another child in my room found something Spiderman and brought it for that child [foster child]. I was just thrilled to see that they realized, that meant everything to him [foster child].

2. Participant’s Impressions of Foster Parents

As the participants expressed their perception of the emotional pain that the foster children bring with them into the classroom, the participants described their role as protectors, listeners, and carers. They also reflected on the role of the foster parent as another person who they believed should be protector, listener, and a carer.
Several participants appeared cautious when talking about foster parents. It seemed that they wanted to say things but were hesitant, perhaps attempting to find the right words, or possibly concerned about what this researcher might think. This was evident when one participant said begrudgingly, “Well, foster parents do ok.” I sensed her disapproval from her voice and facial expression. She seemed to ponder and then to hesitate as if she had more to say but did not want to elaborate. I explained to her again that this interview was about her experiences with foster children in the classroom and that this information would help others to understand better the experience of the classroom teacher who works with children in foster care. These participants did state that foster parents are important persons in the foster child’s educational experience. However, many were highly critical of some foster parents. Others claimed to have witnessed a few highly committed and competent foster parents.

Participants realized the social and emotional needs of the foster children in their classroom and desired to work closely with the foster parents. They wanted to “make sure that the foster parents are involved in the child’s education” yet most participants noted barriers when attempting to work with the foster parents. Several participants felt that the motivation to be a foster parent was not always in harmony with the needs of the foster child. One participant described a foster family that could not have children due to infertility issues and consequently became a foster family. The foster children that were in this home continued to visit with their birth parents and the participant felt the foster parents really did not care about the foster
children and were just waiting for them to go back home. Several participants felt the foster parents became foster parents as a source of income and several other participants said foster parents were in it “for the money” and did not meet the basic needs of the foster youth.

Participants described sending home notes needing signatures by parents, notes commenting on completion of homework, returning homework, and obtaining the necessary educational supplies. However, according to participants, foster parents did not consistently address these needs. Other participants told of foster children who came to school day after day in the same soiled clothing, foster children who were late to school, foster children who had attendance issues, and foster children who waited longer than other children after school for the foster parent to transport them home.

Another participant described a foster care student who constantly made excuses for not completing homework, not having supplies ready when class began, or not bringing gym clothes for gym class. This participant said, “These kids are just like their foster parents, always making excuses.” She stated that foster parents would make excuses for not taking children to counseling and not getting them their medications. When asked why foster parents would make excuses, this participant sounded even more disheartened when she said “I don’t know. Especially when it’s free. I don’t understand that.” Then shrugging her shoulders she said, “There would always be an excuse so then you wonder why the child is making excuses for everything else. A lot of excuses from foster parents were, ‘My car doesn’t work. I have to work’.” This participant continued by saying, “I wanted to say to them, ‘you
brought this child into your home, you need to make accommodations just like you would for your own children’.”

Another participant voiced this same thought about the money concern when asked what would enhance the educational process of foster children. She said, “I think that if they - I don’t know if this is a good thing to say - but if we had foster care parents that didn’t care just about the money.” I responded to her, “That’s been your experience?” She said:

Yes, a lot of it. It really bothers me when you are given money by the state – I’m assuming it is - and the child comes hungry to school. Dirty, same clothes. Hasn’t seen a doctor in how long when you have all this free stuff. No glasses when she should have had her glasses done. That bothers me a lot. I mean really bothers me!

When describing why some foster parents may not understand the needs of the child, another participant said:

I’m not sure if I want to say this but part of it is a poverty thing. I think people [custodial agencies who place children in foster care] want foster parents so bad that I think the quality sometimes is not there.

Clearly the participants were appalled by the foster parents’ neglect of the foster children’s needs, as well as their lack of support for their educational progress.

Children are often placed into foster care because of the abuse, neglect, violence, substance abuse, and mental health issues of their biological parents. These realities influence the safety and welfare of the child. One participant believed that foster care was “a chance for foster children to learn a new routine and
go back to their home with a new set of rules, and they [foster parents] weren’t doing anything better.” This participant described a foster mother who did appear to make a difference in the life of the foster daughter. The foster daughter did well in school and then, at age 14, returned home to the birth mother. This participant saw the girl at a shopping center about a year later and at this time the former foster child was pregnant. Shaking her head, she asked, “Why can’t these foster kids remain in foster care? In this foster family, this girl would have had many opportunities as she was already doing so well in school.” This participant echoed what other participants said when she stated, “Sometimes it seems that allowing a child to return home is about the birth parent, and not always about the child.”

However, another participant believed that the foster parents are in it for the money and were not meeting children’s basic needs as she exclaimed, “Oh, they were dirty, as in unclean. Their clothes were not clean. They smelled, and for the older kids it is very very difficult because if they don’t have the right clothes on, they are horrible to each other.” But this same participant did say, “Some foster parents were very involved. Academically those kids fared a lot better than those whose foster parents were just in it for the money.” Another participant quoted a foster child saying, “This boy that I had said to me ‘this lady I live with (that’s what he called his foster mom – the lady I live with) she don’t care about me. She just in it for the money.’ I heard him tell other kids the same thing.”

Another participant described a situation in which a little girl in her classroom was removed from the birth mom when mom entered a drug treatment program. The little girl was placed into a foster home with a foster parent who was familiar to the
birth mom and the little girl. The little girl was able to remain in the same
classroom. The participant described the foster mom as “lazy.” She said the little
girl was always tired when she came to school, did not complete her homework, was
hungry, had poor hygiene, and did not wear clean clothes. However, when the little
girl was living with her mom, her mom was very involved with the educational
process, talking with the teacher, assuring the little girl was following directions,
completing homework, and engaging in appropriate behavior. This participant said
that the little girl was able to return home after several months and very quickly
everything seemed to be normal again. She said, “This little girl changed so quickly.
She came to school in clean clothes, her hygiene improved, and she was very
happy.”

One participant felt that foster parents’ personal educational experiences
might also influence their comfort with being a part of the foster child’s educational
process. If a foster parent’s education was not of importance in his /her childhood,
then the foster parent may have the same idea in relation to a foster child’s
education. She continued by saying, “It’s probably more your experience with
schooling, what you personally value, and how you were raised.” This participant
described her own educational experience as a child. She said that her family was
poor and both of her parents worked. When this participant got home from school
she cared for her siblings and prepared dinner. There was not time to focus on
homework as the primary focus was on day-to-day survival. She said she understood
the role of education when she began college as an older adult. She said that her
approach with her own children is very different in that she “has an established time
for homework, spends time with her children reviewing homework, reading to her children, and participating in school activities.”

A subsequent participant stated, “Often parents react the way they felt about their own school experience. So if they weren’t successful in school they have a wall up. And they’re defensive.” One participant appeared to search for a reason foster parents may not support the educational process when saying, “It might be that the idea of vested interest in that kid when they’re transient, they’re [foster children] coming and going so why put in all the extra effort kind of mentality.” It appeared that she was saying that foster parents may not commit time and energy to their educational process because foster children move often. A participant who had grown up in the foster care system said:

I was thinking the whole time like, ‘who lets them [foster parents] get away with having that many children, and who would let them [foster children] get away with not coming to school!? And then I remember my own social worker when I was in foster care saying, ‘Susan, you know there are not very many foster care families and they’re [children services] just happy to place them with someone.’ But I was thinking ‘at whose cost?! At the cost of the child’s welfare or at finding a place for the child? Here at this school we ask that question a lot. ‘Who lets them be foster parents?’

Another participant described the challenge of finding foster homes for children and the potential impact on the educational process when she said:

They’re [foster parents] elderly. We’re talking about grandmas who have taken this on out of the goodness of the heart but they’re pushing 60 – 70
years old. They [children’s services] keep placing all these kids in there and everything is a business. It’s run like a business. You have this kid and he needs to go someplace, so you have these foster parents who may have too many kids, may take on children that have behavior issues; they [foster parents] don’t want to be called everyday. They’re doing the best they can and they don’t even know [she sighs, shoulders droop] how long the child will be with them so why invest in the child. It’s easier to be cold and standoffish and not involved with the foster child] when they [foster parents] need to say goodbye. So it’s ‘I’m not going to go up to the school. I’m not going to get involved because Joey may only be here for three weeks.

The concern that foster families may have too many foster children was stressed again when one participant suggested, “But they seem to have more than one foster child and when they do, they [foster parents] seem to be pulled in lots of different directions that they’re not concentrating on just the child that’s in your classroom.”

Several participants recognized that foster parents have accessibility to resources because the children are in foster care. One participant voiced frustration when the foster parent said, “Well, Susie will be Susie.” The participant knew there were psychologists, counselors, and social workers available to this foster parent. Yet when “they said she needs this, this and this, the foster mom would not give her this, this and this.” The participant was very frustrated, actually getting louder and angrier, as she described this foster parent providing poor care:

Susie was always dirty—which was so sad—and Susie wanted to learn, but
she didn’t get her medication on a regular basis. She was then placed into a
new foster home, and oh, my gosh – what a difference! Clean! She’s all A’s
now; she’s on the principal’s list! Susie was getting her medication, this new
foster mom did exactly what the doctor asked, and this little girl was
thriving.

This same participant very emphatically said:

I have never voted for another levy [children services] since I had to deal
with social workers. And I have a daughter that is a social worker and I
know what she has done and how she does it. And I mean [as she snapped her
fingers] her [daughter’s] parents can call in an instant any time of day. We
would call, call, and call! Never see them! We’d never see a social worker!
We’d call because some of them [foster children] had bruises on them and
it’s upsetting.

In contrast, however, several participants experienced foster parents that were
very committed, involving the foster child in positive activities such as band, sports,
returning phone calls immediately to the teacher, and helping the foster child be
successful in the classroom. One participant described a foster family’s support of
the educational process by saying:

I mean there are some foster parents that care about education and there’s
some that don’t. The child I had in my classroom this year – she’s [foster
mother] made every conference, she’s made appointments. I mean she’s
called me. So she’s been a little more involved.

According to another participant, her foster parents “were phenomenal people. In
fact one ended up adopting!” Another participant told of a foster family that took their foster child to Disney World and concluded by saying, “I’ve never heard of a foster family going on a trip that was that expensive for that long of a time.”

Another participant described a foster mom by saying, “This foster mom is trying to expose her to positives. She’s in the band and the foster mom tries to branch both of these little girls out into other interests. She wants them to have a normal life.” Yet another participant described her perception of a foster family that has only one foster child when she said, “Now I see this foster child that I have this year having many more things than most foster kids. But there is a burden on the foster family when there are several foster kids.” A different participant described her present experience with the foster family when she said:

This current foster mom is very involved. She is also working full time but she does things in the school and when you call she gets back to me immediately. If there’s anything she has questions about, she calls – just the normal communication but when I think about this throughout the years I would have to say no. Not a lot of communication from the foster parents to the teachers.

Another participant described a foster child who was very aggressive, screaming in the classroom, hitting, arguing, refusing to cooperate with the classroom rules, and refusing to go home to the foster home at the end of the day. Finally she was moved to another foster home and according to the teacher, “This foster mom was phenomenal - very firm with her, very strict with her but fair. I don’t see the arguing, the screaming. She still has outbursts, but this foster mom is great.”
Finally one participant said:

Of the foster parents I have known I can only honestly say that I’ve known one that I thought, ‘Wow, why they are being allowed to do this?’ Most of them [foster parents] have just been like most parents, just trying to get by, just trying to scrape by, and doing the best that they can. I’ve had a couple that have been exemplary, but I think most of them genuinely care and are kind.

As we walked away from the office, it seemed he was still thinking about parenting when he said, “Parenting isn’t easy for any of us.”

In addition to foster parents, the participants emphasized that there are many other adults and organizations involved in the lives of the foster children. They were particularly aware that children in foster care are involved in the child welfare system, are often considered wards of the state, and are in the custody of the child welfare system. The next theme that emerged relates to the participants’ own awareness of and experiences with formal organizations and their demands.

3. Participants’ Interactions within the System

Participants understand that children in foster care are in the custody of a children services agency and that the agency is responsible for decisions affecting the child. They also understand that the children services agency investigated the biological home, made the decision to remove the child from the home, and identified a foster home for the child. As a result of the role of children services, participants view the public agency as the holder of information and the person who takes the place of the biological parent wanting the best for the child. However,
many participants felt that the public agency was not a conduit of information which perplexed the participant when he/she was committed to making each day a successful day for the foster child.

Participants described many instances of wishing they had more information and more communication with the children services agency. Participants received phone calls from the agency caseworker requesting copies of reports and other educational information. However, participants experienced that their own requests for information regarding foster children often went unheeded. One participant described her communication attempts with children services as follows: “They never return calls. I will call and I will give them my cell. I call them because there are behavior issues. They never call me back.” Another participant described her encounters with children services:

They ask me for my report card, [and] they ask me for my documentation of his behavior but what do I get in return? I get absolutely nothing! I have no idea as to what has happened to get him in foster care.

Other participants believed that communication with children services staff disclosing which children are in foster care may help the participant “to know why they are the way they are, why they are acting out, maybe why they are angry at the whole world.” Describing the importance of information, another participant said:

I could do a better job of helping the foster child. I need to know up front the situation. Why they were taken out, what their background is, if they’re on medication, if they have counseling, if they have seen something traumatic as that really helps to know so that we don’t replicate that in the classroom.
Some things just trigger a horrible memory and if we knew what it was, we could stop that. We could change our own behavior if something is a trigger for the foster child.

Many participants understand that foster children who experience abuse, neglect, violence, substance abuse, and mental health issues in their families of origin exhibit behaviors that are dysfunctional, even more severely so, than behaviors displayed by other children in the classroom. Witnessing dysfunctional behaviors, discovering that the child is in foster care, and receiving an explanation of the initiating issues for the foster care placement, participants stated that they make modifications that will help the foster child experience success. One participant described changing her tone of voice with a particular foster child. She became aware that when she raised her voice, spoke in a sarcastic manner, or moved quickly in the classroom the foster child became agitated, argumentative, and no longer able to focus. She stated that when she changed her own behavior, the inappropriate behavior from the student decreased.

Participants often said that they need information “basically to make decisions.” This participant described how information would be used to make decisions by relating a situation that could occur in her classroom.

We’re standing in line and another child has a bloody nose. If I know that the foster child has an issue with abuse and [as a result of the abuse] saw a lot of blood and that really bothered her, then I would remove her from the line first [then attend to the child with the nose bleed] and I would not have two children freaking out.
Another participant restated the need for information when she cited adopting a dog as an example of how information is important. As when she said, “If you go and get a dog from the pound [who is scared of storms and has been abused] they tell you he is scared to death of storms, because his owner beat him during the storms.” In a very infuriating tone of voice she continued, “Well, wouldn’t that be nice to know if I’m getting a kid who’s scared to death of storms? Wouldn’t that be nice to know? But no, it’s all privileged information and they [children services agency] can’t share any information!” This participant got quiet for a moment, just shaking her head in frustration.

Participants also named the school social worker and the counselor as critical informants when seeking assistance with a foster child. One participant described the importance of the process when she said:

This year we’ve had lots of meetings with the foster parent and with the counselors. I guess because of the stealing issue and the problems that have been going on. Normally I haven’t had those in the past. I’ve seen a huge improvement this year, so it’s been nice because we’re all on the same page. It’s really helped me to end the behavior before it started.

At times it is the principal communicating with foster parents, social workers, and children services’ caseworkers. The principal may, in the words of one participant, “whisk the child to the office, have a conversation, and return the child to the classroom.” Again, according to the participant, no follow-up dialogue occurs with the classroom teacher; no input is sought from the teacher, thus leaving the teacher “in the dark and very frustrated.” Another participant said that information
from the principal would enable the classroom teacher “to understand how scary and traumatizing it [the foster care experience] is.”

Participants reported challenges in their attempt to understand the foster child, knowing that there is much missing information. Participants want their students to be successful and believe that the missing information would help them better assess the capacity and the capability of the child in the learning environment. Capacity and capability are critical when assessing the child’s potential for academic success. Classroom participants often stated that a more comprehensive understanding of the foster child could help them to enhance the foster child’s academic performance.

4. Foster Care Children’s Academic Performance

Over half of the participants described educational difficulties that children in foster care experience, difficulties not experienced by those children not in foster care. These difficulties included poor pre-academic skills, restlessness in the classroom, inability to listen, and lack of attentiveness to such tasks as returning homework and being prepared for the work of the classroom environment.

Many participants emphasized the negative impact on children in foster care when they had to move multiple times during their time in school. They understood that not only did children in foster care change schools frequently but that these moves to new schools also included a move to a new foster home accompanied then by a loss of friends, loss of a neighborhood, loss of previous relationships, potential loss of academic achievement, and often loss of favorite personal possessions. One participant described foster care as a “revolving door,” and another participant spoke
of a moment of shock when she realized foster care students of hers “by the time they were in third grade had already been through six, eight, sometimes ten schools.” Some foster care children feel “beaten down” by so many moves and are difficult to motivate academically. She further elucidated by saying:

You know, sometimes by the time they’re eight or nine they’ve seen so many teachers with smiles on their faces. But it’s hard. They’re at a really young age and they probably viewed me as just one more. Here’s one more teacher trying to help.

In addition to the higher degree of mobility, children in foster care are often in more intervention classes which frequently lead to special education placements and lack of early educational opportunities. Furthermore, they have experienced neglect, and do not get encouragement in the foster home. Many children not in foster care come to kindergarten prepared with some level of education. One participant stated, “The majority of the kids will have some experiences whether it’s church or going to the library, and the foster children don’t have those experiences most of the time.” Another participant described the lack of early educational experiences when she said, “They [foster children] tend to be struggling with even language skills. They seem to be very delayed even in the basic skills and you can tell that a lot to them have not been read to.” This was echoed again by a participant who stated:

Obviously something got them into foster care, and I just believe a lot of those kids seem to be very neglected when it comes to kid things and the things that need to be done with preschoolers to prepare them to come to
school.
The role of poverty was emphasized when a participant said, “I believe that in poverty, parents don’t really value education so they don’t make that a priority of the things they need to do for the kids.” She continued, “You know, we don’t even have kids that are going to Head Start anymore because they [parents] don’t think about it.”

For many children in foster care, school is not the priority. One participant described the lack of academic support by the foster parents as well as other issues obstructing the foster child’s success in the classroom when he said:

I think mostly they don’t have the help that they need at the home. You know they’re getting different help from different people, and going from school to school usually. Sometimes the foster parent would help them, but you know if they’re just coming in, a lot of them [foster children] are bitter, they don’t care about school; they just want to go back to their parents.

Often children in foster care lack the self-confidence needed for academic success. Children in elementary school are developmentally equipped to make friends and to learn routines and structures which are crucial to feeling safe. Children who are not victims of abuse and neglect usually have had their basic needs met which enables them to feel safe and confident to navigate the educational maze. Children in foster care are still struggling with fulfillment of basic needs and often do not feel safe and secure in the foster home or school. These feelings interrupt the ability to be self-confident – to believe that they can do what others do and to have the confidence to attempt new learning experiences. Another participant concurred
by saying:

The one issue is they don’t seem to have as much self confidence. I think once you tell them they can do it, then they show me. I mean I almost have to hover over them. Even though they have a foster parent I almost have to be substitute mom.

Another participant described the learning delays by describing:

Imagine trying to learn how to read. You have to learn how to read between kindergarten and second grade because in third grade you’re going to start reading for comprehension. Well, now you’ve taken these traumatized children who have been traumatized from kindergarten to third grade and they can’t read. They can’t process what’s going on at home to feel secure enough there to come here and learn how to read. There’s no intervention for them, there’s nobody who steps in and says these kids are going to fail and a lot of foster children do fail. It’s not their fault. There’s nothing you can do unless it’s intensive one-on-one intervention which, with other kids in the classroom, we cannot give.

As participants described the ongoing saga of the foster child’s academic challenges, they also observed that foster children resort to problematic behaviors as a means of getting recognition and meeting basic needs.

5. Behavioral Issues with Children in Foster Care

It is customary for participants to provide support and assistance to children in the classroom and it is implicit to participants that children in foster care require more support and assistance than other children require. Often, because of the
behavioral issues of foster children, these children require an even greater degree of support and assistance. Children in foster care are removed from the birth family because of abuse and neglect, sometimes the substance abuse and mental health issues of their birth parents and, as a result, are often traumatized. Just the act of removing a child from a birth parent can be traumatizing and trauma frequently translates into inappropriate dysfunctional behaviors.

When comparing the behavior of the foster children with the behavior of children not in foster care, participants reported clinginess, attention seeking, closer proximity to the teacher, manipulation, defiance, hostility toward others, and general anxiety. One study participant explained:

This foster child was probably, of all the students we had, the most disruptive to our classroom family because she came very bitter, very angry, and very mad at the world. She got into fights with other students and she got into fights at home with her foster family.

Another participant talked about bitterness on the part of the foster child by saying, “If they are just coming into foster care a lot of them are bitter, they don’t care about school. They just want to go back to their parents. They can have long periods of defiance.”

At one time every foster parent is new to being a foster parent. When a child’s first placement into foster care is with a first time foster parent, the newness can produce demanding consequences for both the foster parent and for the foster child. One participant related this when she described the situation saying:

He’s just very anxious. He wants to be heard all the time. The poor little
darling has been washed underneath the bus. The other kids have had their breakfast in the morning and mom is used to the routine, but his routine is brand spanking new. It’s brand spanking new to the foster mom, and he had to get his own cereal and now he just wants to be heard.

Noting the importance of making friends during this developmental stage, several participants recognized that foster children did not spend time with other children outside of the classroom. Several participants noted that often foster children had appointments such as medical, counseling, or visitation and one participant stated that she knew there were rules about with whom foster children spent time, as she noted:

Their behavior is not the same in my experience at all. This boy was very likeable but he definitely had some needs for attention, drawing attention to himself, and he didn’t get together on the weekend with the other kids in our class.

Furthermore, participants believed that the mobility that foster children experience also impacted classroom behavior. One participant clarified this when she said:

Those who came into the classroom two or three months into the school year stood out for awhile with their behavior, tried to do their own tricks and then they found out that I was familiar with most of the old tricks. She said their tricks were making statements such as, “My foster mom won’t let me do my homework;” “I wasn’t allowed to go to sleep;” “My dad went to jail last night;” and “I’m going home with my mom on Friday so I don’t have to do my
schoolwork.” She said that she believed the child did this to take the focus off conforming to the rules of the classroom and trying to elicit the sympathy of the teacher. This same participant also stated, “In order to have foster children you have to have a strong disciplinarian front.”

Participants were often able and willing to minimize the foster care students’ behavior. Participants repeatedly stated that children in foster care have been in different homes, living with different foster children, attending different schools, needing to adjust to the routines and styles of different teachers and foster parents, and often were just trying to work through the maze. Recognizing how hard it must be to be in different schools, one participant said, “No wonder they don’t behave.” This was further accentuated when a participant said:

They have different rules at different schools and different rules at different homes. Often they test you to see what they can get away with. My most recent foster child seemed like she was overwhelmed. It was just hard on her to focus. What was she really supposed to be doing here because she had so much on her mind?

When asked about different rules, this participant said it was things such as some schools and some teachers use assignment books that go home with the child every day with the expectation of the parent signing the book every day. She said that some schools provide basic supplies and other schools do not. Several participants spoke about their behavioral and academic expectations for the foster child. Some participants said they had the same expectations for all their students, while others said that they were more lenient with behavioral issues. One participant
described a colleague who was always allowing the foster child to go to the office for “even the tiniest upset” whereas she expected the foster child to remain in the classroom and “work the issue out with her [the teacher].” Other participants described different routines in different foster homes. Some foster care students had a routine for homework, while other foster homes did not make homework or returning homework to school a priority. Another participant who had come to expect that most foster care students would not bring the basic supplies to school on the first day of attendance said that her college sorority sisters made small bags of basic school supplies and gave them to her so that they would be on the desk when the foster care student arrived. Additionally, the foster care experience may impact the elementary age foster child in other ways.

Elementary age children want to be like their classmates. At this age they are learning to master their environment. Children at this age are also developing a sense of industry. They want to be able to achieve, to do well, and to be recognized by their friends. When children cannot achieve, they feel inferior, unworthy, and inadequate. Children in foster care appear to experience these feelings of inferiority, unworthiness, and inadequacy to a greater degree as foster children often blame themselves for being removed from their families. In addition, their basic needs frequently have not been met, and when this occurs they engage in behaviors that meet their needs. One participant described this behavior by saying:

They cheat when they play games because they want to be the winner.

They don’t finish their work or they copy off somebody else. I think they just don’t have the confidence or the skills getting along. One boy was just
very sneaky and he would take things away from the other kid when he wasn’t looking so he could be the winner. I think sometimes foster children feel like they have to do that in order to win or for it to be equal for them.

While some participants described behaviors of foster children that were similar to the behaviors of other children in the classroom, one participant summarized her perception of behaviors when she said, “So between the two groups, foster children are extremes.” She described what she meant by saying, “They usually are at one end of the continuum of behavior or at the other end of the continuum.” Another participant also confirmed this same thought when she described their behavior:

They are either very guarded and very quiet, seem very inward, don’t want to talk or do anything and then the other type of foster child seems to want to act out immediately. They’re going to be a behavior problem from the get go. They may be oppositional with you right away. So behavior tends to be either on one end of the continuum or the other and it seems there’s no happy medium between the two of them.

Participants said that often they choose how they will respond to the inappropriate behaviors of the foster children. One participant described her response to a foster child’s behavior by saying:

So if they got in trouble a lot of times I overlooked it because I knew they were already having a rough time. So unless it was like you’re going to kill me or you’re going to stab me I never wrote a referral. I never really called home unless I thought it was something serious.
Another participant described her response to behavioral issues when she said:

I’m one of those teachers that take students aside. I’m not quick to write referrals. I take them aside and say, ‘you know, I know you are going through some difficult times right now and I do understand what you feel or how you’re feeling’ and that usually solves a lot of problems.

This response to discipline was reiterated again when one participant remarked in a manner that demonstrated her understanding of the situation:

I try to do everything that I can to keep them in my classroom, and I probably as a teacher, I give them a little bit more leniency than I do for a lot of the other children because I know that the situation they have been in has not been good. However, if their behavior is over the top, if they are hurting someone, or damaging property, then they do need to go out of the room [go to the office]. Sometimes we both need a breather.

This participant stated that she knows she “sometimes gets into power struggles and the best thing I can do is separate the child from me.” The idea of giving a foster child leniency was repeated by another teacher when she stated:

I give them a little more leniency at least in the beginning until they begin to feel safe in the classroom. Obviously they’re dealing with some kind of trauma. But if their behavior is over the top, then there need to be consequences.

This participant described a female foster child who “would scratch the boys when they were in gym class. She turned on the girls in the classroom, kicking and pushing them, writing mean notes and saying negative things about them.” The
participant’s response to this behavior was to remove the foster child from the group, giving her extra time with the counselor, and now the foster child is slowly making friends with the other girls in the classroom. The participant also credited the principal for checking in with the foster girl, talking with her during lunch hour and when he saw her in the hallway. This participant said that ordinarily any discipline issues can be handled between her [teacher] and the school counselor. At the same time, though, this participant noted that the counselor is assigned to two schools and as a result is in each school two days a week. This participant said, “We really need a counselor in our school, all day, every day!” This need for more counselors was reiterated by the majority of the participants.

In addition to behaviors of aggression, increased activity levels, attention-seeking, bitterness, and defiance, several participants described hoarding and stealing behaviors. Participants who had experienced hoarding and stealing behaviors with foster children stated that they believed these behaviors occurred because these children had nothing of their own, and their neglect often left them hungry and fearful that there was not enough food. One participant described the hoarding behavior of a foster child when she said:

With one of the little boys that I had he was a food hoarder because at his parents’ house there was not food and he would hoard food at school, sneak it into his backpack to take the food to the foster home. Of course, his foster parents were very understanding of that. They said ‘No you don’t need to bring food home.’

Several participants related hoarding and stealing behaviors as part of a continuum of
behaviors. They fully described the stealing behavior as a result of having nothing of one’s own. One participant stated:

There was another little girl – she did not want anybody touching anything that was hers. If someone asked to borrow her pencil, she would get very, very angry, and I found out later that it was because everything that she had was taken by her mother and sold for drug money.

Another participant described the stealing behavior as “just stealing silly stuff. Maybe they don’t get to take their stuff with them when they move.” Another said:

I don’t think they have anything of their own. I don’t know for sure but I, I think as they travel from foster family to foster family or even from their original family to a foster family. What can they take with them? They need something that’s their own.

In a parallel manner of thinking, one participant described an intervention, rather than a disciplinary action, she used with a student who was stealing. She said:

We told him, if you don’t steal, you’ll get a prize at the end of the day. Since then, there hasn’t been one incident of stealing. Maybe that prize takes the place of whatever that other little thing was that he didn’t get to bring with him into foster care.

Another participant summarized her experiences and the experiences of other teachers by saying, “Foster children often take things and are hoarders. I don’t think they mean to steal, but they take it so that they have something. I’ve seen lots of hoarding.” She later noted that often these behaviors influence the foster child’s ability to make and maintain friendships.
Children in the elementary grades are dependent on their friends. They are eager to learn new skills and they learn these new skills through interactions with their peers. Friendships are important and friends provide recognition and support as they work along side each other, encourage each other to try new things, and affirm each other when things go well. Friendships also afford children a sense of identification with another person who is similar to themselves. Being a part of a group is very important to children during the elementary period (Berk, 2010; Davies, 2004). They compare themselves to others, and when recognizing disparities between themselves and others they may view themselves as inferior to others. Children in foster care often experience challenges when developing and maintaining friendships with their peers.

6. Foster Care Children’s Interactions with Peers

Elementary age children are learning pro-social and altruistic behaviors. They want to be friends with each other; they use their friends for recognition, support, encouragement, and affirmation. For the foster child who is bitter, angry and aggressive; who steals from classmates, or can’t join classmates on the week-end for a pick-up-game of basketball or a walk through the mall, interactions with peers can be very difficult. Many participants said that often other students did not know if classmates were in foster care unless the classmate made it known.

When participants were asked how foster children make friends, responses included a perception that they find friends like themselves. They find others with whom they are comfortable. “I think they just find each other.” “I think she just tried to blend in with her peers.” Another participant said that a foster child in his
classroom “initially gravitated towards students that don’t make the wisest decisions and because of that she doesn’t make the wisest decisions but did it because she wants friends.” It seems that foster child believe it is easier to be accepted by others with whom the foster child shares similar behaviors, and that the risk of rejection will be lessened. This participant described the students in his classroom as falling into two unique groups – those who were very serious about their studies and those who were more playful with a sense of not caring about academics. This participant described the foster child as one who found it easier to make friends with the students who were more like her, more playful and less focused on the academics.

Another participant noted that often foster children need more help with learning social skills. She said, “Knowing how to ask for help in a friendly way or how to join a group are things that foster children needed additional help with.”

Another participant described this phenomenon when she said:

He was still part of the group but he was different socially. He didn’t get the idea of personal space. He would stand real close, talk right in your face, and these were annoying behaviors to his classmates. I would redirect his behaviors and his classmates would tell him that they didn’t like it.

This same participant said that older elementary foster children “protect themselves” and she felt that by this behavior they were saying, “I’m not really going to get invested in these people.” She continued by saying, “For some of them it’s been a steady stream of struggling and a steady stream of moving places, and by the time you get them in fifth and sixth grade, there’s a bit of a wall up.” This was stated clearly when the participant said, “Some foster kids hang back because they don’t
want to be hurt. They don’t want to get too involved and too entangled in a community and then know that they are going to be pulled out.” At the same time, though, other participants found that sometimes the foster parents were instrumental in helping foster children make friends. One account was: “The foster parent helped the foster child with learning appropriate behaviors, provided a lot of support and structure so that he could make friends.”

The difficulty making friends may be a result of the lack of confidence and the inability to trust that so many foster children experience, as a result of abuse, neglect, and abandonment. This was reflected when one participant said, “I think it is harder for foster children to make friends. Some foster kids move around a lot and I think that’s part of the lack of self-confidence, and most foster kids have that.” Another participant reiterated this difficulty when she said, “It’s hard to make new friends not only at school but new friends at home.” She continued by saying the foster child also struggles with “what is expected of me.” The participants constantly struggle to find ways to help the foster child adjust to the routine of a new classroom and to learn the skills that will produce happy and healthy relationships with them as well as with peers.

7. Participants’ Advice to Colleagues.

Participants depend upon each other for advice when working with foster care students in their classrooms. Several participants discussed the significance of responding to the basic needs of children in foster care with one participant stating, “If those basic needs aren’t met, you’re not going to get any teaching in.” Having a relationship with and providing a sense of safety for the foster child are recognized
as basic needs and one participant noted the importance of helping foster children feel safe in the classroom when she said, “Make them feel welcome, like it’s a place where they’re safe, because I get the impression from some of my foster children, maybe they weren’t in a safe environment before and they need to feel safe.”

Another participant discussed the importance of meeting the basic needs by providing routines. She explained:

They need routines. Sometimes they’ve been to one foster care home and then they go to another home; and so when that’s happened over and over, it’s just hard sometimes and the rest of the kids have more stability and they know more of the routine, and that’s why I said those routines. All kids need routines, but foster kids really need routines. I think that’s comforting for them.

Over half of the participants emphasized the importance of having a link with the foster home, noting that the goal of such communication would enhance the educational experience of the foster child in the classroom environment. Statements such as “Seek out the parent;” “Keep an open door policy. Invite them in;” “Communication with the foster family is key;” and “The home school link needs to be very strong;” and “Make sure that the foster parents are involved in their education;” illustrate the importance of communication with the foster parent.

Another participant reflectively spoke of communication and collaboration with the foster parent as important for other teachers saying:

I keep going back to communication. I take my kids to heart and I want them to feel comfortable. I want them to have self-confidence so I think
good communication with the foster parent [is needed]. Maybe that foster parent is new too, so communication – I mean maybe we can help each other know what’s best for the child. You know, so often we act like we work alone, like we’re the only one who knows what is best. We need to work together.

Understanding and being aware of the foster child’s feelings and situation were additional bits of advice that participants felt were important for their co-workers to understand. Having empathy, understanding the child’s situation by “walking in their shoes,” and understanding feelings associated with being in foster care were noted by numerous participants. One participant explicitly stated:

Look into their background and see because maybe that’s why the child is not getting homework done. If you had to deal with that situation, don’t you think you might be acting out too? Can you give a little more patience with that child because others aren’t? I would just want another teacher to understand that foster children are part of society; they’re not just there by accident. You know that they have obstacles in their way, but need more education in the school system to help them.

Advising another teacher to understand the foster child’s feelings was clearly noted in the following:

I know that these kids are scared. Their rug has been pulled out from underneath them. They don’t know what’s going to happen tomorrow. And they are in a totally new setting on top of that. They’re already in a new home now, for some now they’re in a new school, and they’re just scared that
everything they know is gone.

This understanding that foster children are scared was echoed over and over again.

Understand how scary and traumatizing, how traumatized these kids are even if they’re in the best foster care homes in the world, and how they don’t want to be there. They don’t want to be in foster care, and they don’t want to be in that home. They don’t want to be in your classroom; they don’t want to be in this school.

And again:

Remember they’re scared no matter what age. They can be in eighth grade they can be in kindergarten. They’re scared! Remember that you are probably the only consistent figure in their life so watch the impression you give on day one. Be gentle. Try to make the foster child feel just like other new students that are coming to class and watch for their cues. Is it ok to be excited or is the foster child acting down today so we’ve got to be a little closer [to the teacher]?

Another participant echoed this same advice to her peers when she said:

Make sure they know that they can trust you. You’re there for them. Take the time - even five minutes - to let that child know that you’re there today.

And I would tell my teacher friend that I’d try really hard not to be off this week. You are their consistency.

Another participant succinctly stated:

My advice to participants is this: [It’s] 50% about the curriculum and 50% just being there, being there with your heart. Foster kids need more than
just the state standards – they need to know that the teacher really cares about them and is happy to have them in the classroom.

All participants concurred about collaborating with their peers in attempts to help foster children successfully navigate the education system. They recognized the many challenges that beset foster children and the impact of these challenges in the classroom environment. Participants were quick to express genuine empathy, and, in a variety of ways, stated that they want foster children to be academically, socially, behaviorally, and emotionally successful.
Chapter 5: Discussion of Findings

Chapter 5 presents the discussion of the findings from this qualitative research study. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of elementary school participants who have had children in foster care in their classrooms. Understanding the day-to-day experiences and perceptions of classroom participants provides an additional, critical lens through which to appreciate the educational issues and outcomes of children in foster care.

Twenty-five classroom participants who taught an average of 15.8 years and taught an average of 10.04 foster care students were participants. Eighty-eight percent (n=22) of the participants had a master’s degree. Comparing the lived experiences of multiple participants across three school districts and multiple schools within each district reflected the use of triangulation in qualitative research. The emergent themes were universal for all participants even while the sampling of the participants reflected diversity in the following ways: length of time teaching, age and gender, level of education, number of foster children taught, and geographic location.

Taped interviews were transcribed, coded line by line, and phrase by phrase, allowing for the emergence of categories and themes. Applying the constant comparative method of data analysis throughout the process, that is, listening to and
reading the transcripts, coding, writing and reviewing field notes and memos, analyzing the initial 25 categories, analyzing the emerging eleven significant categories, and lastly, following saturation and final coding, allowed seven themes to emerge. These seven themes highlight the importance of the school environment for children in foster care as well noted in the literature.

The School Experience

A primary experience that remains constant for every child before, during, and after foster care placement is the educational experience. According to Starkey (2003), “school is often the only source of stability in a foster child’s life” (p. 4). Foster care children, like all children, spend a significant amount of their day in the classroom. According to scholars, the classroom experience provides a predictable structure and consistency, which in turn impacts the ongoing psychosocial development, educational outcomes, and the transition of the foster child into adulthood (Gustavsson, 1991; McNaught, 2004; Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2006; Nilsen, 2007). Smithgall et al. (2004) state: “Schools are one of the primary institutions shaping the development of children” (p. 1). “Positive relationships with supportive participants can offer a measure of protection from the disruption and uncertainty associated with out-of-home placement” (Starkey, 2003, p.5) and can be a protective factor against the trauma that resulted in the foster care placement (Christian, 2006). One teacher emphasized the importance of the school environment in the life of the foster child when she said, “provide as much stability and understanding as you can. Foster kids need a little extra TLC. It’s a lot of small things you say and that you notice and that [the teacher] can do to make it better.”
Children in foster care often experience a sense of abandonment and a subsequent loss of trust in adults as adults were the persons who removed them from the home of the birth family. Participants understood this when they emphasized that developing a relationship with the foster child was important and they felt responsible for intervening with such comments as, “Make them feel welcome, like it’s a place that they’re safe.” As the findings of this grounded theory study indicate, it is in the classroom setting that children develop friendships, discover the person whom they are, enhance their autonomy, continue to strengthen their capabilities for ambition and responsibility, and develop their aptitude to work and cooperate with others. School is the part of daily life that reinforces membership in groups and rituals such as class participation, classroom activities, and the peer group activities. Each of these group experiences provides an emotional energy for all youth, but especially for foster children as they transition from living with their biological parents to living with foster parents in different family settings. The ability to navigate classroom experiences provides positive and/or negative energy that impacts the educational success of the student (Hedin et al., 2011).

The research participants in this study clearly understand the journey and the pain of the foster child! The descriptions of the lived experiences of the classroom participants with children in foster care were filled with passion in regard to foster care children’s situations with both biological and foster families, and they repeatedly expressed both sadness and anger as they spoke of the experiences that foster children endured and shared. One participant related this sadness and fear when she said:
Some of the foster children don’t go to school for the entire year and it seems, that they have different rules at different homes and I’m sure different rules at different schools. My most recent foster child moved several times in the past year from foster home to foster home and it was hard for her to focus. What was she really supposed to be doing here because she had so much on her mind?

Sixty-four percent (n=16) of the participants demonstrated a remarkable sense of empathy for the foster children in their classrooms. They were empathetic to the needs of and behaviors of foster children. They understood that many of their behaviors were reactions to personal trauma, loss of home and possessions, and lack of trust in others. Furthermore, they recognized that foster children were often consumed with their family issues, especially the desires and dreams of returning to their birth families. Participants reflected their own intense feelings saying, “How can they do well when they are so angry about being in foster care?” Another said, “You don’t know what types of situations those kids are going through. School is probably the last thing that’s on their mind.” Other statements were also indicative of their affective sensitivity. “Foster kids have to be so scared! I mean, they’ve lost everything.” “It’s probably good I don’t know everything the child dealt with. Honestly, it probably would make me sick to my stomach to know.” And “I know these kids are scared. Their rug has been pulled out from underneath them. They don’t know what’s going to happen tomorrow.” The above mentioned utterances demonstrate that participants understand the impact of trauma, loss, and grief experienced by the foster child. “They’ve been through a very, very bad situation
that is not of their own making.” And these statements were made with anger, sadness, choking voices, as well as a sense of despair.

Many children in foster care are struggling with trust versus mistrust issues as described by Erickson’s psychosocial stages of development (Berk, 2010). While most children are able to navigate the trust vs. mistrust developmental stage during infancy, foster children often regress and need to develop again the ability to trust. Many of the participants recognized and named lack of trust as an issue that foster children bring with them into the classroom. It can be in the classroom that foster children begin to understand cognitively and psychologically that the world is good.

“Make sure they know that they can trust you. You’re there for them” reflected participants’ understanding that foster children bring their lack of trust with them into the classroom. Lack of trust decreases the level of self confidence a foster child may previously have experienced and weakens the foster child’s ability and desire to develop attachments with foster parents, participants, and peers.

Participants view themselves as surrogate mom, advocate, social worker, protector, and even possibly adoptive parent when responding to the emotional needs of the foster child.

Participants observed that additional support is needed to welcome the foster child into the classroom environment. “Don’t make any judgments.” “Treat the foster child like any other child coming into the classroom until you see what they need.” “Come to work every day just for that child. Be their consistency.” “All kids need routines but foster kids really need routines. I think that’s comforting for them” was reflected by classroom participants as they understand that the loss of routines
and stability breaks down any pre-existing trust a child may have had.

To facilitate foster children’s integration into their classes, participants acknowledged taking various actions. To normalize the first day in the classroom for the foster child, one participant described the quick process of moving desks around, placing a desk for the new student [foster child] in the midst of other students, putting books inside the desk, and placing a small welcome bag of pens, pencils, and other supplies on the desk. “It was like we were waiting for the new child.” This welcome activity was done for every new child entering the classroom, thus not signaling out the foster child; however for foster children it was a special attempt at providing a normalizing experience. Allowing several students to go to the office to meet the new classmate [foster child] and to bring the new student to the classroom was also perceived as a means of welcoming the new student. As the literature shows (Farmer et al., 2003) foster children do not want to be perceived as different from their classmates nor do they want to be treated differently. When introduced as a new member of the class, they prefer not to be identified as a foster child. Even the classroom participants did not initially know that a new child was a foster child.

This lack of knowledge, however, causes concern for the classroom teacher. Children in foster care are ordinarily in the custody of a public children’s agency and, as a result, while making the decisions affecting the child, the public agency must abide by Ohio Revised Code’s rules governing privacy and confidentiality. While the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act requires schools to share records with other school officials with legitimate educational interests, the custodial agency does not have federal or state mandates requiring the sharing of child related
information such as reason for foster care placement. Consequently, there is limited sharing of information with the school. Since the custodial agency serves in loco parentis (in place of the parent) the custodial agency has responsibility for the educational needs of those children in its custody (Smithgall et al., 2004). Almost half of the participants questioned the extent of the custodial agency’s responsibility and believed that the exclusion of information had a negative impact on the ability of the classroom teacher to provide a successful educational experience for the child in foster care.

Participants stated they did not know if the foster child had a physical or mental health diagnosis, was taking medications, or what type of abuse or neglect the child had endured. How these issues might manifest in the classroom were of great concern to them. As one participant observed:

We’re standing in line for the cafeteria and another child has a bloody nose. If I know that the foster child has an issue with abuse and [as a result of the abuse saw a lot of blood and that really bothered her, then I would remove her from the line first [then attend to the child with the nose bleed] and I would not have two children freaking out.

A change in the tone of voice of the classroom teacher, a sudden burst of loud noise, a discussion of family composition and how families will celebrate a particular holiday, as well as talking about summer vacation plans are all conduits for emotional and behavioral responses from the child in foster care. Prior knowledge of the family status of the foster child may provide the classroom teacher with the ability to focus these discussions in a way that will not cause emotional pain.
for the foster child. Because the foster child does not want to be different from the other children in the classroom he/she often chooses not to tell the classroom teacher and the other students about being in foster care. While a delicate balance, the classroom teacher can meet the needs of the foster child without disclosing the foster care status. However, without prior knowledge from the custodial agent, the foster child may, with no malice on the part of teacher or other students, experience further psychological or psychiatric distress.

As one participant noted, they are willing to make modifications to the classroom environment, to the classroom curriculum and other learning activities, and to make decisions that will enhance the educational success of the foster child. However, in order for such accommodations to be made, there need to be changes in macro and mezzo policies and procedures.

From an ecological systems theory perspective, “all systems are relevant, important, and influential to the child” (Rittner et al., 2011, p. 365). Never has this been truer than for children in foster care as their lives are impacted by many systems; systems that often are not aware of the obligations and procedures of other systems. Classroom teachers don’t receive information from related systems such as the custodial agency as reflected when one teacher said:

Well, I think that the fact that I don’t know too much about foster care agencies is troubling to me. I’ve had so many kids that I don’t know why [they are in foster care]. I could have encouraged the foster parent and the child if I had known.

Even in foster care the foster child may maintain a relationship with members of the
birth family and these relationships influence the foster child’s friendships and behaviors with the other children in the foster home, the neighborhood, and the classroom. These resulting influences are brought into the classroom and may be the basis of the foster child’s ability or inability to attend to the tasks of the classroom. When the classroom teacher is aware of these influences, she may be able to direct the child’s responses in an appropriate manner if needed. The interactions between the school setting and the custodial agency, the mental health agency, and the medical provider are also influential in providing information to the classroom teacher so that the classroom environment can be more conducive to helping the child cope with emotional responses such as stress and the ability to adjust to new surroundings and new classmates. The relevance of systems working together is illustrated when a participant said:

There’s a lack of communication. I think participants do need to know
Which children are in foster care because that answers a lot of questions why maybe children are acting out, why they are the way they are, maybe why they are angry at the whole world.

Furthermore, lack of information often inhibits the ability of the classroom teacher to assess the capacity and capability of the student to be successful in the learning environment. This is especially imperative for foster children as even the foster parent may not have information about previous educational activities of the foster child. Capacity and capability are critical when assessing the child’s potential for academic success and, by the very nature of foster care, foster children often experience risk factors that do not enhance the potential for academic success.
Participants recognized the need for information, insisted on the receipt of confidential information, and believed that this information is critical when working to assure educational success of the foster child. The role of the custodial agency regarding its rules and implementation of confidentiality and privacy, as it affects foster children, warrants further study. At the macro level, it is critical that custodial agencies develop and implement policies and procedures that mandate the sharing of confidential information with the educational system. At the same time, the educational system must develop its policies and procedures that regulate how the information is shared with the appropriate educational staff and how the educational system shares information with the custodial agency and other systems involved with the foster child. Rittner et al. (2011) state that:

The system remains a complex amalgam of federal and state laws. State and local policies, procedures fraught with indigenous biases in interpretation of those laws, and implementation at local levels by direct service workers, judges, and foster parents, all with the context of community norms about acceptable parenting standards (p. 364).

The foster child’s successful accomplishment of developmental tasks is dependent on the transparent collaboration between the various systems that are responsible for the welfare of this child.

According to Berk (2000), Erikson’s psychosocial theory of development explains that latency aged children experience school as the environment in which they further develop their cognitive and social skills. They are eager to learn new skills, becoming more proficient in the developmental domains of social, emotional,
cognitive, and physical growth. Elementary aged children are developing their capacity for initiative and enterprise and are learning the skills of cooperation and negotiation. Children measure their self worth, potential, and competence for work against other students in the classroom. Foster children want to do well, to achieve, and to be recognized by their friends. Multiple foster home placements and multiple school placements may decrease the level of motivation for some foster children. When they cannot achieve they feel inferior, unworthy, and inadequate. As a result of abuse and neglect, their basic needs have not been met and they engage in behaviors that they feel will meet their basic needs. Participants in this study recognized how foster children engaged in behaviors to get their own basic needs met:

They cheat when they play games because they want to be the winner. They don’t finish their work or they copy off somebody else. I think they just don’t have the confidence or the skills getting along. One boy was just very sneaky and he would take things away from the other kid when he wasn’t looking so he could be the winner. I think sometimes foster children feel like they have to do that in order to win or for it to be equal for them.

Almost every participant described negative behaviors of foster children explaining these behaviors as the products of the abuse and neglect experienced by the foster child. Behaviors experienced by the participants in the classroom included hoarding, lying, aggression, emotional tantrums, and stealing. For some children these behaviors were a means of establishing themselves in the classroom. Years of neglect and abuse produce feelings of anxiety and low self esteem thus the foster
child uses the classroom as a safe haven, displaying anxiety, talking non-stop, “wanting his voice to be heard even if he has nothing really to say,” knowing he is safe and needing to search out how to become his own person.

When foster children are removed from their birth family, the foster child experiences many losses including family, neighborhood, school, friends, favorite toys, and play spaces. The foster child may no longer receive medical services from his / her pediatrician and may no longer be able to worship at the neighborhood church or synagogue. It is critical that foster children be able to conserve these resources, when appropriate, as, according to the tenant of Conservation of Resources Theory (Hobfoll, 1989), “people strive to retain, protect, and build resources and that what is threatening to them is the potential or actual loss of these valued resources” (p. 516). The loss of these resources causes undue stress for the foster child. The resulting response to this stress may be anger, sadness, decreased self-esteem, acting out behaviors such as stealing and hording of food or other objects, refusal to attend to the tasks of the classroom, and an inability to integrate into the classroom and the foster family. “Personal resources such as perceived control and social resources buffer against the negative impact of stressful life events” (Alvaro et al., 2013, p.4). Foster children feel that they have lost all personal resources. A participant reiterated this when she contemplatively said:

Keep them in their same school. To take them out of the school with their connections and their participants and their friends - this is sometimes really all they have. This is harder for them. Keep them in the same school just makes one less interruption in their life. This is their one safe place.
Children removed from the birth family because of abuse and neglect may view their family in an inferior manner. The foster child may exhibit parentified behaviors, having cared for younger siblings or for a parent who suffered the effects of a mental health diagnosis or substance abuse. However, as a result of confidentiality and privacy, such information is withheld from the classroom teacher and the classroom teacher may not know how to support the foster child. School aged foster children may not have had the opportunity to develop peer relationships and may not have learned to regulate behavior. At this age, learning to regulate behavior often happens within the context of friendships but for many foster children friendships are relinquished when moving from one home to another home and often to multiple homes. According to Gallegos and White (2013), “placement stability was linked to educational resiliency” (p. 97). Decreasing disruptions and increasing familial and educational stability for children in foster care is an issue that needs further consideration.

Several of the participants suggested that training for the foster parents and for the classroom participants would be beneficial. Participants believed that training about the foster care system, how children come into the system, the subsequent effects on the foster child, why they are returned to the birth family, and the resources available to foster parents and to children in foster care would be extremely beneficial. According to Wulczyn et al. (2009), additional topics of training for foster parents, participants, and multi system staff include training that sensitizes professionals in multiple systems to the social emotional dimensions of learning, understanding a developmental perspective, the impact of systems, loss of
resources, and collaboration across the systems.

Another concern of the research participants was enhancement of the social skills of foster children. The development of social skills may be problematic. “He was still part of the group but he was different socially. He didn’t get the idea of personal space. He would stand real close, talk right in your face and these were annoying behaviors to his classmates.” Foster children may be too loud, too excited, or too pushy; wanting to be perceived as a fun peer. One foster parent did not allow the seven-year old foster child to participate in a discussion on “Good Touch, Bad Touch” as the foster child would readily disclose all the activity of her sexual abuse. Participants noted that foster children did not have the cognitive or social ability to filter out personal and private information during discussions with their peers.

School may be one of the first places where foster children exhibit inappropriate behavior often the result of the trauma of placement and the trauma of the abuse and neglect that precipitated the removal from the birth family. Participants understand that foster children have been traumatized prior to coming into the classroom and that the trauma continues as foster children respond to the loss of family, parental trust, and continue to experience the loss of resources such as friends and extended family members. Moreover, participants understand that trauma can have a negative impact on the developing brain; sometimes causing changes in the brain that impact the ability of the child to learn, to socialize, and to regulate behavior and emotions.

The feelings of loss are intense for children in foster care. Loss of birth family, friends, possessions, even the loss of a previous school environment and a
classroom teacher can result in some foster children being very angry and defiant and other children becoming introverted and displaying a overall sense of hopelessness. Participants observed behavior that ranged from one end of a continuum to the other; ranging from being aggressive to being introverted. Additionally, stealing and hoarding were found to be common behaviors for foster children who have been neglected. Participants readily identified reasons when they said, “I don’t think they have anything of their own.” “There was no food in his birth family home.” “They don’t get to bring their possessions with them when they come into foster care.” “Mom did not know how to care for the child.” “They just need a thing to hold onto and they don’t have their favorite toy with them.” “They need something that’s theirs.” These same behaviors influenced the foster child’s ability to make and keep friends. One participant described developing an intervention of giving the foster child little rewards, pencils, erasers, and sheets of paper, for good work and good behavior which helped the child meet the need of having his own possessions and decrease the stealing behavior. Reflective of the underpinnings of the Conservation of Resources Theory, participants were able to help foster children replace some of the lost resources, thus being able to decrease the inappropriate behaviors that may have been associated with the foster child’s losses.

Punishing inappropriate behaviors of the foster child was not the approach of the research participants. Rather than perceive foster children as “bad” or “incorrigible,” they were willing to minimize the foster child’s behavior. Participants repeatedly said that children in foster care have been in so many different foster homes, living with many different children, attending different
schools, and needing to adjust to the routines and styles of so many people, that, participants felt the foster child was simply attempting to navigate a maze. “No wonder they don’t behave” and “Unless the behavior is over the top, if they are hurting someone, or damaging property” participants responded non-punitively to the behavior within the context of the classroom by providing more leniency, redirecting the foster child, minimizing power struggles, allowing the foster child extra time with the counselor, encouraging the principal to check in with the foster child without removing the child from the classroom, or, “Simply overlooking the behavior because I knew they were already having a rough time.” Taking the foster child aside, acknowledging the tough time the child is having, and telling the foster child that the specific inappropriate behavior is not acceptable often solved the problem.

Maintaining the foster child in the classroom, not writing a referral to the office, providing the foster child with time to calm self, not recommending a suspension even for one day, and acknowledging the emotional pain of the foster child reinforces for the foster child that the teacher does care, that the teacher does not have a stereotyped perception that foster children are difficult to have in the classroom, and that the teacher still wants the foster child in the classroom. Remaining in the classroom and continuing engagement in the activities of the classroom decreases the potential for the foster child “to detach himself from the population resulting in social isolation” (Gates, 2010, p.201). Detachment and isolation are often the results of negative labeling and can be the root of future issues such as bullying and aggression against others. In contrast to much in the literature,
classroom participants in this study did not demonstrate that they stereotyped foster children. On the contrary, they strove to accommodate the needs of the foster child and facilitate integration of the foster child in the classroom.

The participants in this research study provided additional positive supports by welcoming the foster child with supplies and books, letting the child know that he/she could trust the teacher, providing the foster child with individualized time to talk with the teacher, personally redirecting behavior rather than sending child to the principal’s office, and developing interventions that would aid the child in making behavioral changes. These positive responses to the foster child, contradict the current literature when authors such as Hester et al. (2004) state that participants may actually support the negative behavior of a child by sending the foster child to the office, out of the classroom, using suspension and expulsion, and thus reinforcing the potential labeling consequence that the foster child does not belong with the other students. This type of discipline can begin the spiral descent into isolation and detachment from the educational experience. However, as participants develop an understanding of the resulting trauma experienced by the child because of abuse, neglect, loss of personal resources, and as participants are supported by school counselors and school social workers, they begin to feel empowered, they learn how to help foster children begin to rebuild trust, and over time realize that their own personal response to a behavioral situation is more effective than sending the student to the office for a disciplinary action. An empathetic participant said:

Don’t be too hard on him. And don’t try to equate him like others who are not foster. Be sympathetic towards him and have a good eye on him.
Don’t be too hard on his behavior because already he has grief in his life. Another participant spoke of recognizing the strengths of the foster child and understood the foster child needs to be able to express him/herself and that the teacher needs to be “in tune” with changes in behaviors and recognizing triggers to behaviors. Participants also understand that when the foster child does not feel safe, the child is not going to learn. Participants work to develop interventions that reinforce safety and trust, allowing students to write in journals, talk to the school counselor or social worker, and one participant said, “Come to work every day the first week the foster child is in the classroom. Let the foster child know he can count on you.” That participant understood that consistency provided safety and security for the foster child as the child began to learn to regulate emotions and behavioral responses in the classroom.

Foster children are eager to make friends and the research participants did not find the approach and interactions of the foster child to differ from other students’ approaches when making friends. One participant stated that unless the foster child is engaging in behaviors that are viewed as offensive or hurtful by the other students, making friends is a natural process. When making friends, participants stated that foster children often make friends with students with whom they share similar behaviors. At the same time, though, participants stated that frequently students do not know the family status of classmates, thus they may not know if another student is in foster care.

Foster children do not want to appear to be different from their classmates and participating in the rituals of the classroom helps them to feel accepted;
increasing feelings of safety, security, self-esteem, and stability. Foster children use their friends for recognition, support, encouragement, and affirmation. For the foster child who is bitter, angry and aggressive; who steals from classmates, or can’t join classmates on the week-end for a pick up game of basketball or a walk through the mall, interactions with peers can be very difficult. Those normalizing activities are often not provided or allowed for children in foster care. Again, state licensing rules dictate whether a child may do activities with friends outside the supervision of the foster parent. The interpretation of these rules is fluid and enforced at the personal discretion of the foster child’s custodial agency.

While some foster children were able to participate in extracurricular activities such as band, sports, chess club, and dance, many foster children do not participate in these normalizing activities. Participants believed that when foster parents support such activities and are willing to provide transportation and financial support, the foster child experiences increased self esteem, a deepening sense of resiliency, and “being one of the group.” However, if foster parents are not supportive and involved, then such activities do not occur for the foster child thus eliminating activities that would allow for the development of peer relationships, increased self-esteem, and the capacity to learn cooperation and age appropriate social skills. Goodness-of-fit needs to be considered when placing a foster child into a particular foster home. If the foster parent does not understand the potential positive outcomes of engaging the foster child in extra curricular activities or is not financially able and willing to meet the monetary requirements of the activity, then this foster home may not be a good fit for the foster child.
Forty-four percent (n=11) of the participants found that children in foster care were academically functioning six months to two years behind their classmates. One participant said she was “shocked” when discovering that a third grade foster child had been in ten foster homes and was reading at a first grade level. Other phrases describing the academic issues of children in foster care were: “need to catch up,” “disastrous with many delays,” “attended six or eight or even ten schools by the time they were in third grade”, “out of step with other kids”, “many were in intervention courses”, “lack support of early education”, “further behind with their academics”, and “some may not come prepared to learn”. Other participants noted, “gaps in learning”, “visitation with birth parents takes child’s focus off education”, “academics for foster children are low”, “maybe school isn’t a priority”, and “they don’t disrupt; they don’t excel, but they don’t do anything academically.” The majority of the participants described foster care students who experienced academic difficulties as having practical problems like not bringing supplies, not coming prepared for class, to being several years delayed in their academics when compared to children not in foster care. In other words, there was considerable variation in the obstacles that impinged on academic performance. The majority of children in foster care will reside in more than one foster home and will attend multiple schools during their time in foster care. Some foster children feel so “beaten down” by so many moves that they lack all motivation to participate in the educational process.

Participants understood the role of the foster parent as a critical component of the educational success of the foster child and they had many things to say about foster parents. Twenty percent (n=5) described those foster parents, many fewer in
number, who participated in conferences, returned phone calls, engaged the foster children in extra curricular activities, and the one foster parent who took the foster child on a Disney cruise. In contrast, eighty percent (n=20) of the participants described many negative experiences with foster parents. The comments of the participants ranged from describing foster parents who, “were in it for the money”, to the “foster family who took the child to Disney World.” Many of the statements describing foster parents portrayed them as neglectful. Participants perceived many foster parents as not making the education of the foster child a priority, not providing the supplies, the time and the environment in which to complete homework, not returning phone calls, not providing the medication needed by the child, and not attending conferences with the participants.

Participants were also disturbed by foster care parents’ negligence in other ways. Not replacing broken glasses, not buying school supplies because foster child will leave soon, not helping with homework, coming to school in dirty clothes, or clothes that are either too big or too small, or being in foster homes where children experienced same lack of basic needs as they experienced in the birth home were issues that were noted by many participants during their exposure to children in foster care. Many participants were appalled and saddened by these situations.

Several participants noted the influence of poverty when explaining the foster parents’ response to the educational needs of the foster child. According to the majority of the participants, some foster families may not be able to meet the basic educational needs of children in foster care because they have too many children in the home, are consumed with juggling medical, dental, psychiatric, mental health
assessments, counseling, and visitation appointments for each foster child. Foster parents also must accommodate the social workers, case managers, and therapists who are required to provide services in the foster home. Foster parents then use classroom time to respond to these requirements; classroom time that should be devoted to academics.

With the exception of the findings regarding the thoughts and performance of foster parents, the findings of this qualitative research stand in stark contrast to the findings of quantitative research which detail the number of foster children who have been retained, suspended, expelled, are academically delayed, do not complete their high school education, and become homeless with mental health issues and substance abuse addictions by the age of 25. With a focus on helping foster children preserve or replace personal resources lost because of placement into foster care, being more attentive to the concept of goodness-of-fit when placing a foster child into a particular foster home, and developing laws at the macro level that will compel the multiple systems to collaborate and share information regarding the strengths and needs of the foster child, foster children may experience greater success.

Foster children want to be like other kids and school can be the normalizing environment and activity they desire. They want to feel welcomed and accepted by their peers even though they know they may be brought into the classroom after the school day has started and they may be interrupting a routine in which everyone else is participating. They don’t want to feel different nor do they want to be treated differently. They don’t want others to know that they are in foster care for fear of being rejected, not understood, or that the label of foster care will cloud the way they
are perceived by their teacher and peers. The foster care system is fraught with many challenges that impact successful outcomes. However, the foster care system is not the only system that shares this responsibility.

**Theoretical Perspectives**

The purpose of the research strategy was to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of classroom participants who teach children in foster care. As a result of a literature review, this researcher found that children were labeled and as a result, did not do well nor were they expected to do well by their participants because of the stereotypes that accompany them from foster care into the classroom setting. Therefore, a grounded theory constructivist study would be useful to investigate this social problem. Using the lens of labeling theory, this researcher analyzed the data to determine if participants’ perception and lived experience contributed to negative stereotyping, thus potentially influencing the educational process of children in foster care.

Furthermore, the use of grounded theory strategy helped build localized knowledge, that is, the knowledge grounded in the actual lived experiences and perceptions of the classroom participants who work with children in foster care, in this particular study in northwestern Ohio.

The specific grounded theory strategy was a constructivist approach which allows for the exploration and interpretation of statements and actions of the participants. The constructivist approach clearly places priority on the ongoing collection, analysis, and refinement of data which is extracted from the shared experience and relationships with the interviewees. Grounded theory constructivist
methodology provides for an interaction between the participants and the researcher and can provide a means of resolving a main concern. This approach accepts the fact that multiple participants, each sharing her experiences with foster children, will provide a variety of “truths” based on their experiences, and that the on-going review and refinement of their multiples “truths” will allow for the emergence of conceptual or theoretical assumptions about these experiences. The constructivist approach allows for ongoing clarification of the multiple perspectives and multiple realities of the participants. This strategy allows for the development of mid range theory. The constant comparative method of data analysis is used throughout the process so that comparison of the emerging data is continuously occurring and thus advancing theory development.

**Labeling Theory**

Initially, labeling theory was used as a lens to analyze the data provided by the participants. Labeling theory, a social theory of deviant behavior, would infer that foster children would not be viewed as valued members of the school environment by their teachers, thus leading to their inability to form relationships, to be academically successful, to be maintained in the educational setting, or even to graduate from high school. Labeling theory was initially intended to be a manner of describing, naming, or providing an explanation for a person’s deviant or unexpected behavioral response to a particular social situation. According to Blythe et al. (2012), “Labeling occurs when one is perceived as having a socially significant difference to others” (p. 240). Consequently the label of “foster child” often engendered a negative response from societal members and contributed to a stigmatized social
status. Gallegos and White (2013) have observed:

Youth involved in the child welfare system face many barriers to educational success as they experience many disruptive school changes, endure social stigma and isolation, lack educational supports, are assigned to special education services at a high rate and are often subjected to harsher exclusionary disciplinary actions compared to their peers who are not in the child welfare system. Often barriers exist for foster children as a result of policies and mandates” (p. 460).

The abovementioned is reinforced by Zetlin, Weinberg, and Shea (2006) who stated:

The experience of foster children in the child welfare system neither nurtures nor helps them to develop into productive, functioning adults. The trauma of abuse or neglect, disruption from frequent placement moves and school transfers, and lack of adequate nurturing, guidance, and support result too often in former foster youths not attaining the skills they need to support themselves as adults (p.165).

Gallegos and White (2013) also cited the “Potential targeting of youth in foster care by school administrators and educators based on prior experiences or bias due to stereotypes” (p. 462). The authors further stated that this kind of profiling goes so far as to target youth in foster care for unnecessary and unfair discipline.

The findings of the current study did not support labeling theory. Research participants described feelings of empathy for the foster care students in their classroom, and worked to provide a safe place for these students. Developing a relationship with the foster child appeared to be paramount for many participants as
reflected in the statements, “Make them feel welcomed, like it’s a place that they’re safe” and “most of the time they come in very scared but they latch on very quickly and that’s what you’ll see. They make attachments very quickly because you’re the same person every day.” These statements support relational theory “that proposes that a central human necessity is the establishment of authentic and mutual connection in relationships” (Hinchman, 2013, p.1). Participants stated their desire to know even more about what brought the child into foster care so they could “help enhance the foster child’s academic performance.” This thinking mirrors relational theory’s premise that “growth fostering relationships empower all people involved in them and are defined by an increased sense of worth and a sense of worth that comes from connecting with another person” (Hinchman, 2013, p.1).

**Ecological Perspective**

This thinking also mirrors the concept of ecological theory and goodness of fit. Foster children can begin to develop self efficacy and a capacity for trust, compassion, and empathy when they experience a positive interactive relationship with the classroom teacher. These healthy human connections, according to Tucker, Smith-Adcock, and Trepal (2011), are “key components of satisfaction and growth” (p. 2) and allow for both the capability and ability for developing new relationships. When foster children do not experience mutual empathy and empowerment they may experience, according to Hinchman, “a decreased sense of vitality, lessened knowledge of self, and a diminished sense of self worth” (p. 2). According to Sprang (2009), relational interventions have been shown to decrease symptoms that lead to placement disruption, thus allowing children to experience mutual
relationships with foster parents and with classroom participants.

The findings of the current research also support the ecological perspective. The ecological perspective, as proposed by Gitterman and Germain (2009), provides a framework for understanding the child within the school environment and concerns itself with its commitment to the person-in-environment and goodness of fit concepts (p.51). Gitterman and Germain (2009) state that “ecological thinking emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between people and their environment” (p.53) and in this research, the reciprocal relationships are between foster children, their classroom participants, and the educational environment. Furthermore, according to Gitterman and Germain (2009), “Culture is part of the environment and part of the person, and is expressed through each person’s values, norms, beliefs, and language. The cultural environment affects how people structure their behavior,” as the person and environment shape and influence each other. All of this can be fully understood “only in the context of the relationship between and among them, in which individuals, families, groups, and physical-social environments continually influence the operations of the other” (p.52).

However, in contrast to the perceptions of and experiences with youth in foster care, the participants did not have a generally positive view of foster parents. Foster parents are also a part of the environment in which the foster child finds himself and often participants did not portray the relationship between the foster child and the foster parent as a healthy person:environment fit. Not meeting the basic needs of the child, “They were dirty as in unclean. Their clothes were not clean. They smelled and for the older kids it is very, very difficult because if they don’t
have the right clothes on, they are horrible to each other.”

Participants were also aware that there were many adults and organizations involved with the foster child and that often all those involved did not often work in tandem with the foster child and the classroom teacher. From a systems perspective, participants understood that foster children were in legal custody, that the custodial agent was the keeper of information about the child, and often did not share this information with the classroom teacher. Many foster children attended counseling and medical appointments; two additional systems that did not share information but have the appearance of working together for the best interest of the child; an interest that would have improved the goodness-of-fit with the educational system.

“High risk children such as those in foster care require an ecological approach to address the numerous and complex difficulties they present” (Morrison & Mishna, 2006, p. 471). Participants often said that they need information from all the systems working with the foster child “basically to make decisions” in the classroom. The foster child may be learning coping mechanisms in the mental health setting and the classroom teacher may be teaching the foster child coping mechanisms in the classroom. Understanding what each system is teaching the child may enable each professional to use the same coping techniques thus providing consistency for the foster child. Participants want their students to be successful, want a positive relationship between the environment and the foster child; and believe that the missing information would help them better assess the capacity and the capability of the child in the learning environment. Participants believed that a more comprehensive, systemic approach, particularly at the mezzo system level,
would enable them to enhance the foster child’s academic performance and behavior.

**Systems Perspective**

The participants who participated in this study were also aware that foster children often struggled with being a part of a new second family. This was noted when one participant said, “I know these kids are scared. Their rug has been pulled out from underneath them. They don’t know what’s going to happen tomorrow.” Therefore, a family systems perspective is also useful in understanding the findings of this research project, one that incorporates knowledge of loss and grief.

**Ambiguous Loss**

The definition of family becomes confusing and vague when children come into foster care as children in foster care often view themselves as children of different families. School aged children remember vividly their birth family, grandparents, and relatives from whom they have been removed, and often continue to have visitations and phone calls with parents and siblings. These children have been removed from birth family and legal custody, loco parentis, is assumed by local children’s services that now has a legal duty to act in place of the parent. The children are then placed into the home of a foster family who is assumed to be mainly a temporary family. According to Lee and Whiting (2007), “ambiguous losses in foster care are typically of three types: Family members may be physically present but psychologically absent, physically absent but psychologically present, and in transitions” (p. 417). Participants understood the impact of ambiguous losses and frequently observed the angry and acting out behaviors as a response to this loss. One participant said it well when she said, “How can they do well when they are so
angry about being in foster care? Foster kids have to be so scared. I mean, they’ve lost everything and they [foster children] still love, care, think about those parents and don’t truly understand why they’ve been taken away from them.”

Boss (2004) states as cited in Lee and Whiting, (2007) that “ambiguous loss leads children to think, feel, and act in predictable ways including uncertainty, confusion, distress, ambivalence, experiences of helplessness, and even refusal to talk about the situation and the individuals involved in the situation” (p.419). As described by one participant, “If they are just coming into foster care a lot of them are bitter, they don’t care about school. They just want to go back to their parents.”

One participant understood the foster child as overwhelmed when she said, “What was she really supposed to be doing here because she had so much on her mind?”

Again, from an integrated social systems perspective, it is imperative that each system involved with the child help the child understand why he/she is in foster care and what the plan is for return to the birth family.

**Family Systems**

The understanding of family systems, and loss and grieving meshes with what the ecological perspective holds in regard to coping. According to Gitterman and German (2009), “coping expresses a person’s person:environment relationship since both personal and environmental resources are required” (p.62). The classroom participants in this study wanted to help the foster child increase his / her “personal resources for coping which include management of feelings, problem solving, relationship skills, a hopeful outlook, and optimal levels of self-esteem and self direction” (p. 62). They also aimed to identify and use information from the
environment about the stressors, how to deal with them and how to change the behavior between the foster child and his/her environment so that the stressors contributing to difficult life transitions could be decreased” (p. 62).
Participants in this qualitative study described a variety of professionals who provide services to the child in foster care. Many of these professionals work in the school setting: the classroom teacher, the school counselor, the school social worker, the principal, and the school nurse. However, the majority of participants agreed that they have experienced a lack of collaboration between the resources within the schools and an insufficient amount of time that these resources can be allocated to children in foster care. They described counselors and social workers who provide services at multiple schools each week and suggested children in foster care would benefit greatly from receiving more intensive services from the social worker and the counselor at least once weekly.

**Innovative Roles for Social Worker**

With more time in an individual school, the role of the social worker could be further developed in the educational setting. Social Workers could perform various tasks: meeting with the foster parent to provide emotional support, providing psycho-educational services to the foster parent to help navigate the educational system, and facilitating the development of relationships between the foster parent and the classroom teacher. According to the research participants, school social workers could also perform the same above mentioned tasks with classroom teachers and
other school personnel who work with students in foster care.

Social workers also enhance the educational environment by advocating for children and families, educating on current issues, evaluating and assessing children, intervening on behalf of children, and providing counseling to children. Social workers could educate classroom teachers on family systems theory. They could also help classroom teachers understand loss of family, loss of resources, adjustment to new families, grief and loss issues for the foster child, and educate classroom teachers on the behavioral and emotional responses to such issues. Social workers could assist the teacher in developing interventions that would enable the foster child to experience success in the educational process.

The social worker could work closely with other mezzo systems such as medical professionals and psychiatrists in collecting information that would provide information to the classroom teacher and enhance the educational process. The social worker could identify and introduce community resources such as neighborhood churches, mental health programs, tutoring programs, medical resources, and recreational programs that provide services to the child in foster care and to the foster family.

Working within the scope of macro practice, the social worker could advocate for changes in the laws that dictate how foster care is provided. A critical need is for a change in the laws regarding confidentiality. Many participants felt that confidentiality rules prohibited them from knowing information about the foster child resulting in their inability to respond appropriately to the child.

According to the participants, it appears that foster parents are not well trained
to meet the needs of the foster children in the home. Participants described foster homes as having too many foster children and as a result could not meet the needs of all the children. The experiences and perceptions of several of the participants were that some foster parents did not understand the educational needs of their foster children, did not know how to access the supports that do exist, and some were not willing to provide the time and the monetary resources that would allow the foster child to participate in additional services. The provision of more training for foster parents by educators was seen as critical to fill a gap that is missing in foster parent training.

Many public and private non-profit child welfare agencies employ social workers whose primary role is to assure the safety and well being of children in foster care. The role of social workers should be expanded to include a systemic understanding of the educational needs of the child in foster care, the role of the foster parent with the educational system, understanding the foster child’s response to loss and grief, loss of resources and ambiguous loss, and the role of resources such as counseling for the child in foster care. Collaborative efforts need to be established so that teachers, social workers, foster parents, and counselors understand and are supportive of each team member working with the foster child. Social workers need to understand how children learn; how trauma impacts the ability to learn, and the relationship between educational expectations and the ongoing development of the child. Using social workers to provide the same curriculum of understanding trauma, knowing how foster children develop relationships, and understanding the impact of foster care on the child to the classroom teachers, the custodial agency
staff, and the foster parent may increase the knowledge of the foster care experience and may increase an understanding of the need for greater collaboration between systems. Understanding that each system (i.e., the custodial agency, the school, and the foster family) has a distinctive role to perform, social workers could provide identical training to persons in each system, especially to elementary school teachers, thus increasing the consistency between systems in understanding and responding to the foster child. This activity may enable greater success for the foster child.

The role of the foster parent needs to be reviewed and continuously evaluated. It is critical that foster parents understand the importance of education, the impact of trauma and foster care placement on the educational process, how to be supportive of the educational process and the classroom teacher, and how to build a supportive learning environment in the foster home. This type of training differs from training that teaches foster parents how to provide a safe environment for foster children. Child welfare agency social workers need to be given latitude in evaluating foster parents and their support of the educational process. Furthermore, greater scrutiny needs to occur when assessing adults’ qualifications to become foster parents including a discussion of the potential foster parent’s level of education, the commitment to the education system, and allocation of financial resources that would enhance the educational progress and success of the foster child.

It is evident from the data, that participants believe information about the foster child would be beneficial to the educational success of the foster child. At the same time, participants felt that, under the guise of confidentiality and privacy, the
custodial agency makes a deliberate decision to withhold information from the classroom teacher. Administrative policies regarding confidentiality need to be reviewed and revised. Custodial agency administrators need to be trained on the benefits of ethically sharing confidential information about the foster child and how this information would be used to provide a better educational environment for the foster child. Child welfare social workers then need to be given the responsibility of providing selectively the appropriate information that would enable the classroom teacher to provide an environment that may enhance the educational success of the child in foster care. Child welfare agents are the locus parentis of the foster child and thus have a great degree of responsibility when interpreting the guidelines of HIPPA and providing confidential medical information.

**Future Research**

Twenty-five classroom teachers voluntarily participated in this qualitative study. The majority of the research participants teach in urban schools that have a high percentage of economically disadvantaged students. It may be worthwhile to conduct similar studies in schools that have a lower percentage of economically disadvantaged students and then to compare results with studies conducted on predominately white, upper middle class schools. Additionally, it would add to the knowledge base if similar studies could be conducted with rural and suburban school systems. The same research question can be used with other strategies such as phenomenology and case studies in which more in-depth interviewing of and prolonged engagement with research participants could yield richer data.

Participants noted mixed perceptions of foster parents. While several foster
parents maintained a very close working relationship with the classroom teacher enrolling the foster child in extra curricular activities and taking the foster child on vacation, participants believed other foster parents provided only minimal care for the child as demonstrated when the foster child did not complete homework, did not return paperwork to the school, or wore clothes that were dirty and ill fitting. Foster parents receive a plethora of training, though the training topics are often of their discretion. Future research, using a mixed methods approach, could review the training topics, the skills and education of the trainer, and the ability of the foster parent to implement the training when working with the classroom teacher.

Participants believed that the lack of confidential information about the foster child often impeded the classroom teacher from making modifications to their teaching style and classroom activities that impacted the ability of the foster child to be successful in the classroom. Is this an issue that is inherent in the locale of these schools or is it possible that other schools and children service agencies have developed and implemented procedures that provide for the sharing of information? Researching national, state, and local policies and procedures may unearth other ethical alternatives that will enable classroom teachers to receive the information that they believe is critical to the educational process.

Information about foster children is much more prevalent at this time than in the past. There is a greater understanding of the impact of abuse and neglect, of trauma, and of mental health issues describing how as these issues impact the birth family and the foster child. This increase in knowledge may account for teachers having a better understanding of the foster child. Studying foster children at different
developmental stages may provide additional knowledge that reflects educational
capacity and capability. The impact of foster care on the younger child may be very
different from the impact on the older child who is entering foster care for the very
first time.

Many participants believed that the presence of and use of mental health
personnel in the school was a critical resource for the foster child, the foster parent,
and even the classroom teacher. Not every school district has the capability to
provide this resource within the school. Again, the impact of these resources,
available or not available, could be studied from both a quantitative and a qualitative
perspective and the findings could be used to determine the effectiveness and
usefulness of these resources.

Although foster children comprise a small percentage of the classroom
population, their personal experiences have been marred with the trauma from abuse
and neglect, from the impact of mental health issues, and from the abrupt removal
from the birth family home. The resulting responses to these traumas spill over into
the classroom consequently influence the foster child’s adaptations to the classroom,
educational process, and life long learning. Each one of the multiple systems has a
degree of responsibility for the educational experience of the child in foster care.
Collaboration, accountability, and acceptance of responsibility are critical
components of providing the framework for educational success for children in foster
care. Therefore, it would be highly advantageous to conduct both qualitative and
mixed methods studies on systems’ collaboration and the problems that obstruct
collaboration.
The participants in this qualitative study understand that foster children are often “out of step with other kids,” that “visitation with birth parents takes the child’s focus off education,” and that, “maybe school isn’t a priority.” However, the classroom teachers who served as participants in this study understand the needs of foster children, are empathetic to foster children, and are committed to providing the best education experience possible to foster children. They are willing and wanting to collaborate with others in providing a better educational experience. These participants know what is needed to enhance the educational experience and desire to be a part of that important process.

**Conclusion**

Predominantly quantitative research studies based on labeling theory have focused on school experiences of children in foster care. The findings of those studies paint a very dismal picture which identifies numerous negative outcomes. Yet there is a paucity of qualitative studies in this area, particularly those that investigate the classroom teacher’s perceptions of and lived experiences with their students in foster care. The findings from this grounded theory study which utilized a sample of elementary classroom teachers from three school districts and fourteen schools in a Midwestern state do not concur with those currently in the literature. In this study, the participants demonstrated that they understood the traumas that children in foster care endure, and they demonstrated that they understood how those traumas lead to loss, grieving, and mourning that can impede the child’s success in the classroom. Furthermore, the participants expressed repeatedly and through specific illustrations their empathy and concern for the children in their care.
The findings of this study also speak to the seriousness with which elementary classroom teachers approach their professional role as teachers. They believed that with more specific information about each foster care child assigned to them, and education and training about the foster care system and pertinent issues, they would be more competent to work with children in foster care and their foster parents, as well as with the custodial agency.

In light of the findings of this study, findings which, for the most part, contradict existing knowledge and labeling theory, it is imperative that more research in this area, particularly qualitative studies using grounded theory strategy, be conducted to revise and update the knowledge base. And only when we translate that new knowledge to designing and implementing collaborative programs and services will we be addressing the best interests of the child, the child in foster care.
NEEDED

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHERS

WHO HAVE TAUGHT

FOSTER CARE CHILDREN

FOR TWO YEARS

Purpose: To share classroom experiences with an OSU doctoral student for her dissertation research

Date and Time: Scheduled for your convenience

Please contact: Diana Kleman

419-376-0048 Or klemand@the12inc.org
Appendix B

Semi-structured Interview Schedule

1) How do children living in a foster family perform academically when compared to children living with biological parents or parent?

2) How do foster care children in your classroom behave toward you?

3) How do other students act toward the foster child?

4) How do foster children make friends?

5) What experience have you had with foster care children and their families outside of the school setting?

6) What, in your opinion, would enhance the educational experience of foster children (e.g. academically, socially, recreationally)

7) What is the level of involvement of the foster parent at school?

8) What advice would you give to another teacher who will have foster care children in the classroom for the first time?
Appendix C

IRB Consent Form

The Ohio State University Consent to Participate in Research

Study Title:

Researcher:

Sponsor:

This is a consent form for research participation. It contains important information about this study and what to expect if you decide to participate.

Your participation is voluntary.

Please consider the information carefully. Feel free to ask questions before making your decision whether or not to participate. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and will receive a copy of the form.

Purpose:

Procedures/Tasks:

Duration:

You may leave the study at any time. If you decide to stop participating in the study, there will be no penalty to you, and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your decision will not affect your future relationship with The Ohio State University.

Risks and Benefits:
Confidentiality:

Efforts will be made to keep your study-related information confidential. However, there may be circumstances where this information must be released. For example, personal information regarding your participation in this study may be disclosed if required by state law. Also, your records may be reviewed by the following groups (as applicable to the research):

- Office for Human Research Protections or other federal, state, or international regulatory agencies;
- The Ohio State University Institutional Review Board or Office of Responsible Research Practices;
- The sponsor, if any, or agency (including the Food and Drug Administration for FDA-regulated research) supporting the study.

Incentives:

Participant Rights:

You may refuse to participate in this study without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you are a student or employee at Ohio State, your decision will not affect your grades or employment status.

If you choose to participate in the study, you may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. By signing this form, you do not give up any personal legal rights you may have as a participant in this study.

An Institutional Review Board responsible for human subjects research at The Ohio State University reviewed this research project and found it to be acceptable, according to applicable state and federal regulations and University policies designed to protect the rights and welfare of participants in research.

Contacts and Questions:

For questions, concerns, or complaints about the study, or you feel you have been harmed as a result of study participation, you may contact ____________________.

For questions about your rights as a participant in this study or to discuss other study-related concerns or complaints with someone who is not part of the research team, you may contact Ms. Sandra Meadows in the Office of Responsible Research Practices at 1-800-678-6251.

Signing the consent form

I have read (or someone has read to me) this form and I am aware that I am being asked to participate in a research study. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered to my satisfaction. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

I am not giving up any legal rights by signing this form. I will be given a copy of this form.
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**Investigator/Research Staff**

I have explained the research to the participant or his/her representative before requesting the signature(s) above. There are no blanks in this document. A copy of this form has been given to the participant or his/her representative.

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Appendix D
Codes Early in Data Analysis

- Teachers must communicate
- Make sure you’re supported by others
- Provide stability
- Routine
- Home-school link
- Quality not present
- Situation is not better
- Lack of basic needs
- Dirty
- Foster mom lazy
- Teacher caring attitude
- Afraid he would get in trouble
- Siblings burden to family
- Good foster mom
- Good foster parent
- Mother’s day
- Fp just drops off double edged sword
- Paperwork
- Kids cruel and mean
- Fc Not picked as a partner
- Teach empathy
- Lack of social skills
- 15 different schools
- Mom vs mom (birth mom vs foster mom)
- Increase self esteem
- Labeled by other students
- Fc sometimes picked on
- Teachers get it
- Steal
- Steal – don’t have own things
- Don’t know school routines
- Revolving door
- Need information
- CSB frustrating
- Birth parent involvement hurts kids
- Fp overwhelmed
- Can’t get permission for field trips
- Can’t reach fp
- Fp nurturing
- Encourage fc
- Get others to help
- Kids need routines
- Kids / routines = security
- No one in his corner
- Classroom environment
- Survival is enough
- Poor foster parenting
- Not better than family
- Clothes too small
- Upsetting phone call from school
- Doing it for the money
- Need training
- Provided routines
- Don’t announce new child
- Give teacher hard time
- Finding out fc status
- Kids can be cruel
- Fc Tattled a lot
- Fc Inappropriate shouting out
- Lack of bonding
- No knowledge of social services
- Care package
- More social opportunities
- Fc new clothes
- Jealousy by non foster kids
- Academically delayed
- Hoarding
- Lack social skills
- Fp lack of experience
- Lack of stability
- Know abuse history
- System-no support
- More communication
- Missing paperwork
- Bio home disruptive
- Fc – just a paycheck
- Teachers be mindful
- I want you here
Invite fp in
Put self in child’s shoes
Have behavioral goal
Teacher feels alone
Fc out of control
Events trigger behavior
bring baggage
Act non-existent
Need seamless transition
Poverty
Abuse – careful tone of voice
Provide educational supports
School social worker
Angry behavior

teacher education
give fc a break
has grief
disclosure = understanding
poor academics
poor attendance
teacher creates climate
fc - bullied, teased
can’t maintain friendships
generational issues
fc tell their stories
partnership with parents
more resources
test the teacher
Appendix E

Sample of Memos

Teachers get it – they understand trauma related to foster care, they understand why foster kids lie and steal, they are very empathetic, they are vested in these kids, very empathetic, really want to go the extra mile for foster kids but feel that lack of information from children services, the legal guardian, impedes their ability to do the best they want to do

Developmental understanding of being in foster care – teachers are trained about the developmental stages of learning but are not trained about how children respond to being in foster care and the issues of loss and grief at different ages and developmental stages

Teachers understand that foster kids are searching for safety and a trusting person; teachers believe that the classroom should be seen as a safe place, and that foster kids should be able to trust their teachers

Some teachers agonize over what has happened to foster kids; “If I knew… I would be sick to my stomach” need to balance role of teaching with training- provide training about foster care, services, trauma – requests from teachers
Teachers are frustrated with foster parents: foster parents don’t do enough, don’t support the educational process, may not send foster kids to school on time, poor hygiene, may wear dirty clothes, clothes are too small; at same times some foster parents do well – always return phone calls, take foster children on vacation

Lack of information – if teachers knew why children are in foster care they could modify lesson plans, sometimes their own behavior – not be so loud, move so quickly in the classroom etc

Being a parent is difficulty for many of us. Teachers recognized that foster children bring a variety of issues into a new foster home and into the school. They understood that often foster children have been in multiple homes and multiple schools with different routines in the foster homes, different family types, not able to trust anyone, not able to focus on the issue on the table, with loyalty issues between birth family and foster family.
References


