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Pepperdine University
Graduate School of Education and Psychology

EXPLORING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF FOSTER YOUTH WHO OBTAINED
GRADUATE LEVEL DEGREES: SELF-EFFICACY, RESILIENCE, AND THE IMPACT ON
IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education in Leadership, Administration, and Policy

by

Cristina Miranda

October, 2019

Linda Purrington, Ed.D. – Dissertation Chairperson

This dissertation, written by

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DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my daughter Faith, to all who have survived the foster care system, and to all the individuals who have made efforts to improve the lives of current and former foster youth specially Papa Larry. I love you and I miss you.

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Above all I want to thank God for this wonderful journey and for showing me his love through all the people he has placed in my life. When I think of my journey up until this point, I am overwhelmed with gratitude for all those who have walked alongside me. Your prayers, words of encouragement, good thoughts, and positive energy have made all the difference.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of former foster youth who have completed graduate level academic programs in order to discover and describe the elements that these individuals believe led to their academic success. The primary research question for this study was: what do former foster youth who completed graduate level programs report as elements that contributed to their academic success?

The researcher utilized a qualitative approach and portraiture methodology. In depth, interviews were conducted with six individuals, three women and three men, who spent time in foster care and later went on to obtain graduate level degrees. A qualitative approach and portraiture methodology were utilized to explore and paint an in-depth picture of participants' compelling stories and perspectives.

The data revealed six themes experienced by five or more of the participants including dealing with shame/stigma, being resourceful, having internal drive, being supported by multiple mentors, proving others wrong, and the impact of mental health.

Three conclusions resulted from analysis and interpretation of study findings. First, community support in the form of multiple mentors over time was essential to the academic success of former foster youth who entered and completed graduate level programs. Second, despite completing graduate degrees, former foster youth in this study still struggled with the shame/stigma of their past experiences in their personal and professional lives and needed continuing services and support. Third, the circumstances that affected the educational experience of the participants and made their needs unique and challenging in comparison to other students in the school system, were school mobility/instability, dealing with multiple systems, and navigating the shame and trauma.

Recommendations for education institutions of all levels (K-12 and higher education) and child and family serving agencies were outlined in order to improve the academic outcomes of future generations of foster students. Recommendations were in relation to professional learning, personnel, mindset, student services, culture/environment, additional resources, and accountability.

Chapter One: Foundation of Study

Like the canary in the coal mine identifying dangers, students in the foster care system are able to identify the gaps in the education system, therefore making it better for all students.

—Jaiya John, *Reflection Pond: Nurturing Wholeness in Displaced Children*

Background

In the year 2017, the United States Department of Health and Human Services reported a total of 442,995 children in the foster care system in the United States (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017). Children are placed into the foster care system for an array of reasons including physical abuse, sexual abuse and or neglect (Hayek et al., 2014; Hochstadt, Jaudes, Zimo, & Schachter, 1987; Taussig, 2002). Unfortunately, many times the very system that was created to save children from abuse and neglect, fails to do more good than harm (Havlicek & Courtney, 2016; Halfon, Mendoca, & Berkowitz, 1995; Kools, 1997, 1999; Sullivan & van Zyl, 2008).

Children in foster care face many adverse experiences during their childhood (Bruskas & Tessin, 2013). Regrettably, for many foster children, their lack of access to equitable opportunities remains constant from childhood through adulthood. Studies have found that former foster youth experience a multitude of challenges during their adult years including early pregnancy, dependence on government assistance, and involvement in the criminal justice system (Ahrens, Garrison, & Courtney, 2014; Havlicek & Courtney, 2016). In addition to these challenges, individuals who have experienced the foster care system also face adversity in their efforts to obtain an education.

Findings in the literature reveal that youth who are placed in foster care face a plethora of barriers that inhibit them from progressing in their academic journeys. Amongst these barriers is the trauma they often carry due to the adversity they have encountered (Blitz, Anderson, & Saastamoinen, 2016; Geenen et al., 2015; Ko et al., 2008; Walkley & Cox, 2013; West, Day, Somers, & Baroni, 2014). In 1995, Drs. Vincent Felitti and Robert Anda conducted the Adverse Childhood Experiences study. Through this study, Drs. Felitti and Anda concluded that a strong relationship exists between exposure to abuse and household dysfunction during childhood, and various risk factors for many of the leading causes of deaths during adulthood (Felitti et al., 1998).

In fact, children who are in foster care have to deal with trauma associated with the abuse and neglect they experienced, often at the hands of individuals whom they love and trust most (Frerer, Sosenko, & Henke, 2013). Additionally, they must also cope with trauma associated with separation from family, friends, and teachers. Even if a child had a loving family before entering foster care, the simple action of removing that child from his or her loved ones is a traumatic experience in and of itself (Taussig, 2002). Studies have found that trauma leads to behavioral and emotional challenges that have a significant impact on the education of children who have been placed in foster care (Day, Dworsky, Fogarty, & Damashek, 2011; Day, Riebschleger, Dworsky, Damashek, & Fogarty, 2012). Furthermore, the absence of stability and high rates of school mobility also contribute to the educational disruption of foster youth (Day et al., 2011, 2012; Weinberg, Oshiro, & Shea, 2014).

These elements reflect the various challenges on the academic journey of youth who are in foster care. Still, a study conducted by McMillen, Auslander, Elze, White, and Thompson (2003) found that 70% of high school aged foster youth had aspirations to attend college. Even

though foster youth have a desire to attend college, due to the trauma and lack of stability in their lives, they are often ill prepared to make the transition from high school to college (Cox, 2012; Day et al., 2011, 2012; Weinberg et al., 2014). A study conducted by Day and colleagues (2011) found that foster youth are less likely to take college preparatory course in comparison to their peers, even if the test scores of both groups are similar.

A different study found that once in college, students who had spent time in foster care struggled academically. They also had lower rates of college graduation and college retention, even when compared to low-income and first generation college students (Day et al., 2011). Additional studies have shown that less than 10% of individuals who spent time in foster receive a 4-year degree (Courtney et al., 2011; Cox, 2012; Pecora et al., 2006). Given the poor academic outcomes for former foster youth at the K-12 and undergraduate level, a need exists to understand the success factors, barriers, and motivations of individuals who spent time in foster care, and were able to receive a graduate level degree. Therefore it is necessary to explore the lived academic experiences of individuals who spent time in foster care and went on to receive postgraduate degrees.

Problem Statement

Individuals who enter the foster care system are faced with a multitude of challenges. Prior to their involvement with child-welfare, these children encounter abuse and neglect so severe that it causes them to be physically removed from their homes (Arad & Wozner, 2001; Baugerud & Melinder, 2012; Wald, 1974). Entering the foster care system does not necessarily ameliorate the situation for these youngsters. Studies have shown that abuse and neglect may continue to occur while in foster care (Arad & Wozner, 2001; Halfon et al., 1995; Havlicek & Courtney, 2016; Sullivan & van Zyl, 2008; Wald, 1974). Furthermore, youngsters who grow up

in foster care often feel disposable, and they also carry feelings of shame, and low self-esteem (Kools, 1997, 1999). One study in particular highlighted the death of a 17-month-old child that occurred while the child was placed in foster care (Pelton, 2008). As previously mentioned, the post-foster care experience for those individuals who emancipate from the foster care system is extremely challenging (Ahrens et al., 2014; Havlicek & Courtney, 2016). In addition to high involvement with the criminal justice system, early pregnancy, and dependence on government assistance, individuals who emancipate from the foster care system also encounter many challenges within the education system (Courtney et al., 2011; Cox, 2012; Day et al., 2011; Pecora et al., 2006).

Researchers in the field have significantly explored the academic experiences of foster youth at the K-12 and undergraduate levels. One area that is yet to be explored is the lived academic experiences of individuals who spent time in foster care and went on to receive postgraduate degrees. Given the obstacles identified by the literature at the K-12 and undergraduate education levels, it would be beneficial to understand how some individuals were able to surpass the life and academic adversities they faced, and reach the highest levels of academia.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore the lived experiences of former foster youth who have completed graduate level academic programs in order to discover and describe the elements that these individuals believe led to their academic success. For the purposes of this study, academic success will refer to the completion of a graduate level program.

Research Question

What do former foster youth who have completed graduate level programs report as elements that have contributed to their academic success?

Study Importance

This study is important because it has the potential to benefit some of the most vulnerable population of students in the education system: foster youth, and other students who have experienced adversity in their childhood. Other groups can benefit from this study; amongst these are professionals in the education system including educators, school counselors, school psychologists and administrators. Although individuals in foster care have been students in the public-school system for decades, due to issues of confidentiality, many school staff have not been aware of their status (Barrat & Berliner, 2013).

An additional group of people that might be interested in the study are individuals involved in the child welfare system such as social workers, probation officers, court appointed special advocates (CASA), child welfare attorneys, resources families, and non-governmental-organizations (NGOs) serving foster youth. These individuals are often the ones who oversee the education of students in foster care and could assist youth in navigating the education system.

The outcomes of this study could be utilized to assist educators who are guiding current students in foster care by learning how other foster youth were able to reach the highest levels of academia in spite of adverse childhood experiences. Potential benefits of the study include a new contribution to the field in regards to the experiences of individuals who obtained postgraduate degrees and emancipated from the foster care system.

The results of the study could also assist in improving student outcomes for foster youth and other students who have experienced adversity in their childhood. Additionally, the

outcomes could be used to inform education entities about successes, failures, and processes when working with foster youth, directly from the perspective of foster youth themselves.

Additional potential benefits include a better understanding of what leads to the success of former foster youth in spite of their challenges. Individuals who emancipate from the foster care system are at a higher risk of entering prison, experiencing homelessness and/or mental illness, and becoming dependent of governmental subsidies (Courtney et al., 2011). These outcomes can have a negative impact on our society. If we can discover what motivates youth to obtain an education and how to remove barriers that may prevent them from obtaining an education, the hope is that they not only do not go to prison or rely on governmental subsidies, but that they also become contributing members of society, and increase their social mobility. Additionally, the findings could also be used to inform the direction of future studies.

Currently a gap exists in the literature with regard to the graduate level academic lived experiences of individuals who were formerly in foster care. This study will contribute to the extant literature, because experts know relatively little about the experiences of foster youth at the graduate level. This study is particularly timely given the many adverse experiences students in our nation are experiencing including school shootings, natural disasters, community violence, and political climate among others. If we better understand the elements that compel students to obtain a graduate level degree and excel in their academics in spite of the difficulty they faced as children, we can assist others toward similar success.

Definition of Terms

- *Academic Self-efficacy*: “refers to students’ confidence in their ability to carry out such academic tasks as preparing for exams and writing term papers” (Zajacova, Lynch, & Espenshade, 2005, p. 679).

- *ACEs*: the acronym for Adverse Childhood Experiences, a study conducted in the mid 90's by Kaiser Permanente and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Highlights the long-term impacts of adverse childhood experiences in adult lives (Felitti et al., 1998).
- *Assembly Bill 12*: California Fostering Connections to Success Act, signed into law on September 2010. Effective January 1, 2012, the bill allows eligible 18 year olds in foster care to remain in foster care up to age 21 contingent upon budget appropriation by the state legislature. Youth over age 18 in foster care are designated as non-minor dependents (California Department of Social Services, 2011).
- *At-Risk Children*: Children who are significantly more likely to have poor social and emotional outcomes (Fung, Fox, & Harris, 2014).
- *CASA*: The acronym for Court Appointed Special Advocates, volunteers who are recruited and trained to advocate on behalf of abused and neglected children in courtrooms and communities (CASA for Children, 2015).
- *Complex Trauma*: Child maltreatment, domestic violence, and other forms of early interpersonal trauma that disrupt primary attachments increase the risk for developing a constellation of difficulties referred to as complex trauma (Cohen, Mannarino, Kliethermes, & Murray, 2012)
- *Foster Care*: When social services or the juvenile justice system mandate residence in a supervised setting that is outside the biological family (Kools, 1997).
- *Group Home*: "A non-detention privately operated residential home, organized and operated on a nonprofit basis only, of any capacity" (California Department of Social Services, 2011, para. 8).

- *Guardian Scholars*: A program typically found in higher education institutions to support and meet the unique needs of individuals who transitioned out of the foster care system and are pursuing a post-secondary degree (California Department of Social Services, n.d.).
- *LCAP*: The acronym for Local Control Accountability Plan. The plan where all of the school districts receiving public funding need to identify how the funds they receive will be used. In the plan, districts must specifically identify how they will meet the individual needs of special underperforming subgroups, including children in foster care (California Department of Education, 2015).
- *LCFF*: The acronym for Local Control Funding Formula, a formula that determines the funding each public school district will receive. Includes funds that should be used to address the unique needs of special groups including low-income students, English learners and foster youth (California Department of Education, 2015).
- *Maltreatment*: Types of abuse or neglect on a child under the age of 18 by a parent or guardian or another person in a custodial role (e.g., coach, teacher; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016).
- *McKinney-Vento Act*: federal piece of legislation that ensures the educational stability and immediate enrollment of homeless children and youth (U.S. Department of Education, 2004)
- *Mobility*: The multiple disruptions experienced by youth in care due to the various changes in school and home placements (Zetlin, MacLeod, & Kimm, 2012).

- *Non-Minor Dependent:*

On and after January 1, 2012, a foster child, as described in Section 675(8)(B) of Title 42 of the United States Code under the federal Social Security Act who is a current dependent child or ward of the juvenile court, or who is a non-minor under the transition jurisdiction of the juvenile court, as described in Section 450, and who satisfies all of the following criteria:

- He or she has attained 18 years of age while under an order of foster care placement by the juvenile court, as described in Section 10103.5.
- He or she is in foster care under the placement and care responsibility of the county welfare department, county probation department, Indian tribe, consortium of tribes, or tribal organization that entered into an agreement pursuant to Section 10553.1.
- He or she has a transitional independent living case plan pursuant to Section 475(8) of the federal Social Security Act (42 U.S.C. Sec. 675(8)), as contained in the federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (Public Law 110-351), as described in Section 11403. (California Legislative Information, 2018, para. 22)

- *Nonrelative extended family member:* “An adult caregiver who has an established familial or mentoring relationship with the child, as described in Section 362.7” (California Legislative Information, 2018, para. 14).

- *Post Secondary:* Any form of higher education after high school including vocational schools, community colleges, technical schools, colleges, and universities (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2016).

- *Relative*: “An adult who is related to the child by blood, adoption, or affinity within the fifth degree of kinship, including stepparents, stepsiblings, and all relatives whose status is preceded by the words ‘great,’ ‘great-great,’ or ‘grand’ or the spouse of any of these persons even if the marriage was terminated by death or dissolution” (California Legislative Information, 2018, para. 13).
- *School Mobility*: “The practice of students making non-promotional school changes, often during the school year” (Rumberger, 2003, p. 6).
- *Self-efficacy*: “A self-evaluation of one’s competence to successfully execute a course action necessary to reach desired outcomes” (Zajacova et al., 2005, p. 678)

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The theoretical framework for this research study consists of three theories, including identity development, self-efficacy, and resilience.

Identity development. Identity development is a theory that has been explored by many individuals. Amongst the most renowned theorist of identity development are Charles Cooley, and Erick Erikson. According to Kools (1999), in the year 1968, Erikson conceptualized identity development as “the process by which the adolescent derives a conception of the self that incorporates a recognition of one’s capabilities and limitations” (p. 142). Erikson identified eight stages of development that unfold throughout the life span of a human life. According to Erikson, during the fifth stage of human development an individual may struggle with an identity crisis as they develop their identity. In 1902 Charles Cooley developed the looking glass self-theory (Cooley, 1922). The premise of the looking glass self-theory is that our vision of ourselves is highly influenced by what we believe others think about us. Given the unique experiences of individuals who grew up in the foster care system, Identity Development has been

selected as one of the grounding theories for this study. The researcher is interested in understanding the impact that growing up in a foster care setting had on the identity development of individuals who were able to obtain a graduate level degree.

Self-efficacy. Psychologist Albert Bandura is one of the most prominent researchers in the area of self-efficacy. Bandura (1986) defined self-efficacy as a person's judgments of their own ability to organize and implement courses of action necessary to achieve certain performances. Self-Efficacy was selected as a grounding theory for this study as the researcher elected to explore and understand how foster youths' self-evaluation of their competence to successfully execute academic performance, impacted their ability to reach some of the highest levels of academia. Extensive research on self-efficacy shows that high self-efficacy is correlated with positive outcomes such as high academic achievement (Bandura, 1993; Bondy et al., 2017; Niehaus, Rudasill, & Adelson, 2012). Inversely, a study conducted by Lackaye, Margalit, Ziv, and Ziman (2006) showed that students with learning disabilities who reported low academic self-efficacy and low social self-efficacy, also rated their mood as more negative and reported lower levels of hope and less investment of effort in their academic work.

Resilience. Perez, Espinoza, Ramos, Corona, and Cortes (2009) describe resilience as "the process of overcoming the negative effects of risk exposure, coping successfully with traumatic experiences, and avoiding the negative trajectories associated with those risks" (p. 153). In their article, "Academic Resilience Among Undocumented Latino Students," Perez et al. argue that two elements are essential for resilience: risk and protective factors. The researcher elected to explore resilience as one of the theoretical frameworks for this study due to the adverse experiences encountered by individuals who are placed into foster care. As mentioned earlier, even if a child had a great family prior to entering the foster care system, the

simple act of being removed from one's family can be an adverse experience (Taussig, 2002). Based on Perez et al.'s definition of resilience, the act of being in foster care would be considered the risk. Through this study, we will explore the protective factors that led to resilience for those former foster youth who obtained graduate level degrees. In efforts to obtain a greater understanding of the various components that contribute to resilience, the researcher has elected to explore the ecological systems theory by Urie Bronfenbrenner. Various elements can influence one's trajectory. If we can gain a better understanding of the protective factors that contribute to resilience, we can make changes necessary to address the barriers inhibiting foster youth from attaining academic success.

Delimitations

“Delimitations are self-imposed boundaries set by the researcher on the purpose and scope of the study” (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008, p. 134). This study only included participants who were former foster youth and who have obtained a postgraduate degree. An additional delimitation is time, as the researcher has a personal timeline of finishing study in two years.

Limitations

Given the population that the researcher interviewed, there were six limitations to this study. The first limitation relates to asking individuals to reflect on past experiences that occurred years earlier. Participants' recollections of foster youth experiences may not be as clear or as detailed years later. A second limitation was that participants could have choose to remove themselves at any moment, since participation in the study was voluntary. A third limitation was that these participants shared a commonality of having spent time in the foster care system. As a consequence, the ability to infer across the general population was limited due to the sample size being small and therefore less generalizable. A fourth limitation to this study was access to

participants, since foster youth are a smaller group within the general population. The fifth limitation of the study was that the data collected was self-reported, not measured by the researcher observing first hand. The final limitation was that the study might underestimate the challenges of participating in graduate school as a former foster youth, as the study only examined the experiences of those individuals who successfully completed a graduate level degree.

Assumptions

The study has four primary assumptions. The first of these is that participants answered truthfully, since they self-reported. An additional assumption is that the participants had a sincere interest in participating in the study and had no ulterior motive to participate. One additional assumption is that the interviewees answered the interview question accurately. The final assumption of this study is that the interviewees understood the questions.

Organization of Study

This research study is presented in five chapters. Chapter One consists of the background of the study, problem statement, purpose statement, importance of the study, definition of terms, an overview of the theoretical and conceptual frameworks, research question, delimitations, limitations, and assumptions. Chapter Two presents a review of the literature that includes the historical context of legislation impacting foster youth's education, factors that contribute to the academic success of foster youth, and also barriers that prevent students in foster care from achieving academic success in K-12 and higher education. Chapter Two also contains the theoretical frameworks for the study of focus including identity development self-efficacy, and resilience. Chapter Three describes the research design and methods. Chapter Four provides

detailed study findings, and Chapter Five includes an interpretation of study findings, conclusion, and study recommendations.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

The academic experiences of foster youth at the K-12 and undergraduate levels have been significantly explored by researchers. One area that is yet to be explored is the lived academic experiences of individuals who spent time in foster care and went on to receive postgraduate degrees. Given the obstacles identified by the literature at the K-12 and undergraduate education levels, it would be beneficial to understand how some individuals were able to surpass the life and academic adversities they faced, and reach some of the highest levels of academia. This chapter presents the rationale for conducting research on the lived experiences of former foster youth who have completed graduate level academic programs.

According to the Administration for Children and Families under the Department of Health and Human Services, in 2017 442,995 children were in foster care, the largest number of children in foster care since 2008 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017). Research tells us that children who are placed into the foster care system are amongst the most academically vulnerable population of students (Altshuler, 2003; Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2006). Even when compared to other vulnerable populations of students including English learners and low-income students, students in foster care fare far worse in regards to academic outcomes. Unfortunately, for many children who have been placed into foster care, the lack of opportunity continues to follow them throughout their adult life. Studies show that young adults who emancipate from the foster care system are at a greater risk of homelessness, have higher involvement with the criminal justice system, have poor access to health care, and have high rates of pregnancy (Ahrens et al., 2014; Havlicek & Courtney, 2016). Given the many adversities encountered by individuals who have experienced the foster care system, it would be beneficial

to gain an understanding about the elements that contribute to the academic success of individuals who were placed in foster care and were able to obtain graduate level degrees.

Organization of the Chapter

In order to understand the context for foster youth and education, this literature review is structured into seven sections, (a) historical context; (b) a theoretical framework that is composed of three theories including identity development, self-efficacy, and resilience; (c) factors that contribute to the academic success of foster youth; (d) barriers at the K-12 levels; (e) barriers in higher education; (f) an analysis of the literature; and (g) a summary of the chapter.

Over the last three decades, several legislative efforts have attempted to ameliorate the educational outcomes for individuals who have been placed in foster care. The first section of this literature review explores the various efforts that have been made at the state and federal levels in order to better the academic outcomes of foster youth. The second section of this literature review introduces a theoretical framework that is composed of three different and important theories. The three theories are identity development, self-efficacy, and resilience. Some key themes are found within the theoretical framework. For identity development, the literature shows that traumatic events have an adverse impact on the development of identity. For self-efficacy, the literature informs us that it is important for individuals to believe in themselves and in their abilities in relation to life success. It is also important for individuals to have someone else who believes in them. Lastly, the literature on resilience informs us that one of the primary factors for nurturing resilience is supportive relationships. The resilience section also touches upon Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, as a way to better understand resilience in foster youth.

The third section of this literature review explores the factors that contribute to the academic success of individuals who have been placed in foster care. Amongst these are (a) mentoring and permanent connections, (b) social/emotional supports, and (c) study/organizational skills. The fourth section explores the academic barriers for foster youth at the K-12 levels. The literature identified five primary barriers that foster youth face during their K-12 trajectory. These include (a) The absence of stability and high rates of mobility, (b) the lack of understanding between systems, (c) behavior issues displayed by foster children in the school setting, (d) emotional factors faced by foster youth including stigma and trauma, and (e) foster students not being up to grade level in regards to their academics. The fifth section of this literature review introduces the academic barriers encountered by foster youth in higher education. The literature identified five barriers in higher education, including (a) finances, (b) lack of knowledge about higher education and opportunities available to facilitate the journey, (c) lack of preparation for the academic rigor in college, (d) lack of understanding between systems, and lastly (e) trauma and mental health issues. This chapter also includes an analysis of the literature from the point of view of the researcher based on her experience as a professional in the fields of child welfare and education. The chapter concludes with a summary that recaps the various findings in the literature.

Historical Context

Over the last three decades, several legislative efforts have attempted to ameliorate the educational outcomes for individuals who have been placed in foster care. In 1987, Section 477 of Title IV-E, Independent Living Initiatives, was ratified creating an Independent Living Program. This legislative action authorized funds for states to support young people who are making the transition from foster care to adulthood. Services that may be covered through these

funds include educational and employment assistance, training in daily living skills, supportive individual and group counseling, and housing assistance (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children, Youth and Families, 1987).

Over a decade later, congress passed the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 which replaced the 1986 Independent Living Program. This bicameral and bilateral piece of legislation aimed to improve the independent living program by “increas[ing] the amount of assets allowable for children in foster care” (Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, Sec. 111).

Furthermore, the legislation highlights the importance of supporting the educational endeavors of foster youth by stating “help children who are likely to remain in foster care until 18 years of age prepare for and enter postsecondary training and education institutions” (Sec. 477). At the heart of this piece of legislation was the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP). By the year 2002, discretionary funds of up to \$60 million annually were authorized. These funds continue to be available to former foster youth in the form of education and training vouchers (Fernandes, 2006).

In addition to efforts made by the federal government, the state of California has also made strides to address education barriers and have a positive impact on the academic experiences of foster youth. In 2004, the state legislature passed Assembly Bill 490 (AB 490) in efforts to increase educational stability for foster youth. AB 490 not only increased the educational stability for foster youth, it also mandated that all school districts have a foster care education liaison and it also required immediate enrollment of foster youth even in the absence of school records (Education: Foster Children, 2004).

On September of 2010, Governor Schwarzenegger signed Assembly Bill 12 (AB 12) into law, taking effect on January of 2012. The landmark piece of legislation would allow young

adults in the state of California to remain in foster care up until the age of 21 (California Department of Social Services, 2011). Prior to the passage of AB 12, young adults would age out of the foster care system at the age of 18, many without skills to successfully make the transition to adulthood. The passage of this piece of legislation was largely due to the findings of the Midwest study, a research study that was conducted with child-welfare agencies in Illinois, Wisconsin and Iowa. A total of 732 youth who had been in foster care participated in the study. The findings of the study revealed the poor outcomes faced by many of the young adults who age out of the foster care system. Additionally, findings revealed that if foster youth obtained support past their 18th birthday, they would have better outcomes including obtaining a high school diploma and being enrolled in college (Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004).

In 2013, Assembly Bill 216 was passed (High School Graduation Requirements: Pupils in Foster Care, 2016). Assembly Bill 216 amends section 51225.3 of the Education Code and adds Section 51225.1 to the Education Code in reference to high school graduation requirements for individuals in the foster care system. The purpose of this bill is to help high school students who are in foster care graduate from high school. Prior to this legislation, students who were placed in foster care were being asked to meet the same high school graduation requirements as their non-foster youth peers. However, due to the constant change in placement and high rates of school mobility, foster youth miss an average of six months every time they change high schools (Hudson-Plush, 2006). If a child was placed in a foster home, but received a seven-day notice in the middle of midterms, and was required to change schools, that child would miss their entire semester. Due to this issue, foster youth in California were often unable to meet the high school graduation requirements. Assembly Bill 216 allows youth in foster care to graduate with less

requirements than their non-foster youth peers, if the foster youth transfers high schools after their second year of high school.

The last few years have been monumental in regards to advancing the K-12 educational outcomes for children in foster care. At the federal level, statute 1844 section E of Senate Bill 1177 (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015), for the first time, provides guidelines to ensure the educational stability of children in foster care. ESSA also amended Title VII-B of the McKinney-Vento Act. McKinney-Vento is a federal piece of legislation that ensures the educational stability and immediate enrollment of homeless Children and youth (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). In 2016, the United States Department of Education published a nonregulatory guidance report in regards to the programming for the education of homeless children and youth. In the guidelines, the departments of education ask school personnel to receive information regarding the impacts of trauma on a student's behavior and how to lessen the effects of trauma in schools, by providing trauma-informed support (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). In 2014, the Department of Education also released guiding principles to improve school climate and discipline. The fifth action step in the first guiding principle to improve school climate asks school districts to engage in collaboration with mental health, child welfare, juvenile justice and other agencies in efforts to align prevention strategies and intervention services for students (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). The state of California has also made significant efforts to advance the K-12 educational outcomes for children in foster care.

In California in 2013, the passage of Senate Bill 91 (School Finance) amended section 42238.02 of the Education Code, providing school districts with additional funding to support English learners, low-income students, and for the first time, including foster youth in the

subgroup of students who are eligible for additional resources (School Finance, 2013). Senate Bill 91 also created the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) and incorporated the Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) as an important component of the LCFF. Through the Local Control Accountability Plan, each school district is to describe the annual goals for all students, including specific populations of students such as low-income students, English learners, and foster youth. Furthermore, school districts are required to identify the specific actions that will be taken to meet the needs of foster youth in their LCAPs. Additionally, the new state accountability system requires all school districts receiving public funding to report their performance measures on the new California School Dashboard for all students including foster youth and homeless students. It is no coincidence that the federal and state governments have implemented legislation and incorporated practices to address the educational barriers of students with a history of foster care and other traumas. The needs of foster students are very different from the needs of low-income students, hence the reason why foster youth have been identified as a subcategory of students who need additional support (Barrat & Berliner, 2013).

Senate Bill 1023 allows the office of the Chancellor of the California Community Colleges to enter into an agreement with up to 10 community colleges in efforts to provide comprehensive services to foster youth. The colleges interested in participating in the program would apply to the board of governors. The law states that priority is given to the colleges serving a greater number of foster youth. The law further states that the board of governors for the California Community Colleges would be required to submit a biennial report where they would address how the program can be expanded into other college districts or other higher education institutions (Community Colleges: Foster Youth, 2014).

One of the most recent pieces of legislation passed in efforts to support foster youths' education attainments is Assembly Bill 854 (Educational Services: Pupils in Foster Care, 2015). This piece of legislation focuses on aligning eligibility with the LCFF. Prior to the passage of this legislation, the Foster Youth Services program (FYS) did not serve children placed in foster care under kinship care. However when LCFF was passed, the services for foster youth identified under the legislation also included children who were in foster care and placed under kinship care. A clear dichotomy was evident between the two, hence the reason for the passage of the bill. This legislation changes the name FYS to Foster Youth Services Coordinating Program (FYSCP). Not only does the law better align with LCFF, but it also has a greater focus on coordinating services amongst child-welfare, probation, the courts, local school districts, and also higher education institutions. This allows for more comprehensive supports as foster youth make the transition from the K-12 education system to higher education.

Theoretical Framework

Identity development. Identity development was identified as a grounding theory for this study in efforts to better understand the ability of individuals who have spent time in foster care and were able to obtain graduate level degrees. More specifically, the researcher is interested in learning about the impact of being placed into foster care on the identity development of those individuals who managed to obtain some of the highest levels of academia. In 1902 Charles Cooley introduced the looking glass self-theory, through this concept, Cooley (1922) concluded that individuals form their identities based on how others perceived them and interact with them. For individuals who grew up amidst adverse experiences, the reality of Cooley's theory would have negative repercussions.

Findings in the literature of identity and trauma and shame/stigma inform us that, indeed negative life experiences can have an adverse impact on how individuals develop their identity of themselves (Daughtery, 2012; Kaufman & Johnson, 2004; Kools, 1997, 1999; Matthews, Banerjee, & Lauermann, 2014; McMurray, Connolly, Preston-Shoot, & Wigley, 2011; Mulkerns & Owen, 2008; Oakes, 2011; Strauser, Lustig, Cogdal, & Uruk, 2006; Unoka, & Vizin, 2017). A study conducted by Oakes (2011) explored the experiences of 11 individuals who were adolescents during the civil war in El Salvador. Findings in the study revealed that protracted war experiences had negative impacts on the identity development, particularly on those who had participated in the war at a young age. The individuals who struggled most with identity issues described deep feelings of abandonment, betrayal and a general lack of trust. Oakes also found that some of the respondents appeared to have identity problems, she described them as appearing to be “stuck in a certain stage of life, having difficulties moving on, unable to enjoy life” (p. 938).

A different study conducted by Unoka and Vizin (2017) examined the levels of early maladaptive schemas, shame, and anxiety or any reactions to social put-downs. Unoka and Vizin describe early maladaptive schemas:

negative unconditional schema-level representations, regarding core emotional needs of attachment, autonomy competence, sense of identity, ability to express valid needs and emotions, limit-setting capacity, and self-control. They develop during childhood or adolescence, in abusive and rejecting family environments in which the expression of core needs are regularly invalidated. (p. 323)

The researchers compared three groups. The first group consisted of 56 patients who had been diagnosed with borderline personality disorder, the second group was made up of 24 patients

without personality disorder, and the last group consisted of 80 individuals identified by the researchers as healthy controls. Findings of this study revealed that borderline personality disorder identity symptoms were significantly correlated with characterological, and behavioral and bodily shame. There was also a significant correlation between challenging relationships and bodily shame. Lastly, findings in this study also revealed that individuals who perceive themselves as inferior or suffering from negative cognitive schemas that evaluate the self as rejected, incompetent, unlovable and subjugated were more prone to react to social put-downs with stress and anxiety. Unoka and Vizin's findings support Cooley's theory, that identity development is heavily influenced by how we perceive others view us.

The two articles previously mentioned explored the impact of shame/stigma and trauma on identity development. Although the articles did not specifically look at those with a foster care background, the experiences identified by the respondents have similarities with those of a foster child. Those who have been placed in foster care have identified this experience as traumatic, shameful and stigmatizing (Clemens, Helm, Myers, Thomas, & Tis, 2017; Farmer, Selwyn, & Meakings, 2013; Michelle, 2015; Salazar, Jones, Emerson, & Mucha, 2016). They have described feelings of unwanted, and disposable (Kools, 1997, 1999; Mulkerns & Owen, 2008) and they have been described by those around them as demanding, attention seeking, immature and anxious (Zetlin et al., 2012). If Cooley's looking glass self-theory is valid, then the experience of foster care is sure to have had a negative impact on the formation of the identity of those individuals who have been placed in it.

Self-efficacy. Self-efficacy was identified as a grounding theory for this study in an effort to better understand the various elements that led individuals formerly in the foster care system to complete some of the highest levels of academia. Including their own evaluation of their

competence to successfully execute academic performance. Albert Bandura is one of the most prominent researchers of self-efficacy. In his book *Social Foundations of Thought and Action*, Bandura (1986) defined self-efficacy as “People’s judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances” (p. 391). Findings in the literature of self-efficacy reveal that self-efficacy is a strong predictor of academic success (Bandura, 1986, 1993; Bassi, Steca, Fave, & Caprara, 2007; Bondy, Peguero, & Johnson, 2017; Ferren, 1999; Lackaye et al., 2006; Niehaus et al., 2012; Zajacova et al., 2005). When a person has high self-efficacy, their aspirations and performance are also high. A study conducted by Neihus et al. (2012) examined the contribution of self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation, and participation in an after school program on the academic achievement of Latino middle school students. A total of 47 Latino students between sixth through eighth grade participated in the study. Findings revealed that self-efficacy was a positive predictor of students’ standardized math achievement scores and their attendance in school.

In 1993, Albert Bandura wrote an article titled “Perceived Self-Efficacy in Cognitive Development and Functioning.” In the article, Bandura stated that students’ beliefs in their own efficacy determined their “aspirations, level of motivation, and academic achievement” (p. 117). Bandura further stated that teachers’ beliefs in their personal efficacy to be able to motivate and promote learning, impacted the learning environments they created and also the academic progress students made. Bandura affirmed

staff who firmly believe that by their determined efforts, students are motivatable, and teachable whatever their background, [even] schools heavily populated with minority students of low socioeconomic status achieve at the highest percentile ranks based on national norms of language and mathematical competencies. (p. 143)

Lastly, Bandura stated that the faculties' belief in their instructional staff was a contributing factor to the schools level of academic achievement.

A different study conducted by Bondy et al. (2017) explored the academic self-efficacy of children of immigrant parents. Findings in the study revealed that high self-efficacy led to higher academic achievements. The researchers of the study further emphasized that “students who have more involved parents have relatively higher academic self-efficacy” (p. 498) highlighting the importance of family involvement to achieve academic success. Unfortunately for many foster children, having family involved in their academics is not a reality, yet it would be beneficial to understand if self-efficacy could still be a predictor of academic success for foster students, even if other factors such as family involvement are not in place.

Resilience. The final theory that was selected as a grounding theory for this study was resilience theory. Perez and colleagues (2009) describe resilience as “the process of overcoming the negative effects of risk exposure, coping successfully with traumatic experiences, and avoiding the negative trajectories associated with those risks” (p. 153). One cannot explore the lived experiences of individuals who have lived through the foster care system and managed to reach some of the highest levels of academia without considering resilience. Resilience literature identified supportive relationships as one of the most common elements that contribute to resilience (Drapeau, Saint-Jacques, Lépine, Bégin, & Bernard, 2007; Hass, Allen, & Amoah, 2014; Jackson & Martin, 1998; Jones, 2010; Morales, 2008; Perez et al., 2009; Piel, Geiger, Julien-Chinn, & Lietz, 2017; Samuels & Pryce, 2008). Erik Morales (2008) conducted a follow up study after a decade, with ten individuals who were originally identified as resilient students during their undergraduate experience. The individuals had to meet four criteria in order to be categorized as resilient. The four factors included (a) to have completed 30 units as a full time

student at an elite university, (b) have a minimum 3.0 GPA, (c) originated from an urban household where neither parent had attended college and where neither parent held a job above the nonskilled or low skilled levels, and (d) the students had to have an ethnic minority status. When the students were interviewed again after a decade, they identified a number of factors that contributed to their success. Some of them attributed their success to their self-confidence, and others shared about their strong desire for a better life as a motivating factor for succeeding, interestingly all four respondents also attributed their success to the support of an individual in their lives.

A different study conducted in England by Jackson and Martin (1998) explored the experiences of individuals who had spent time in the foster care system and managed to obtain some academic success as they were attending college. A total of 105 individuals completed a questionnaire, while 38 who were identified as high achievers participated in a more intensive study. Findings in this study revealed that many of the high achievers “reported a special relationship with at least one person who made time to talk with and listen to them” (p. 580). The most common theme identified in the resilience literature was supportive relationships.

Nonetheless, relationships alone may not lead to resilience. In an effort to better understand the resilience factor, the researcher will be exploring Urie Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory. Bronfenbrenner defines the ecology of human development as “the scientific study of the progressive, mutual accommodation between an active, growing human being and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives, as this process is affected by relations between these settings, and by the larger contexts in which the settings are embedded” (p. 21). For Bronfenbrenner, it was not enough to look at an individual and their behavior, but in order to really understand someone, we must also consider their

environment, the individuals with whom he or she interacts, and the climate of the greater society as a whole. Bronfenbrenner describes four levels of systems that impact the individual. He calls these the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. Figure 1 presents a graphic of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory.

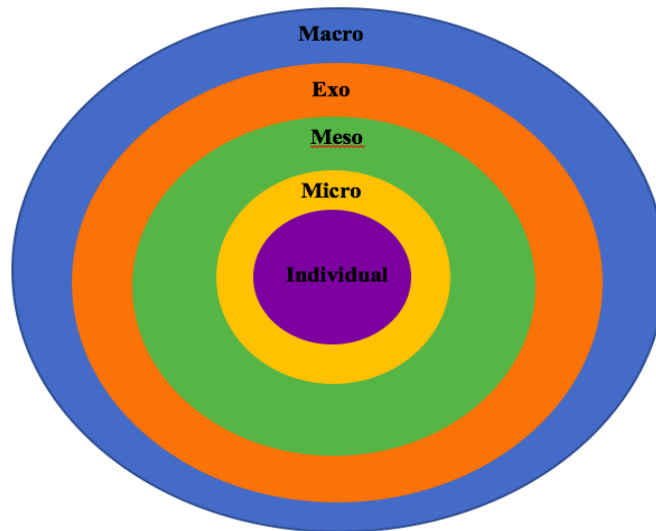


Figure 1. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory.

Microsystem. Bronfenbrenner (1979) describes the microsystem as a “pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person” (p. 22). The microsystem is composed of the individual's most immediate relationships such as friends and family. For individuals growing up in the foster care system, their microsystems might include foster family, as well as biological family and close friends.

Mesosystem. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), the mesosystem is made up of the relationships between two or more settings in which an individual is actively a part of, such as school and home. For an older individual, the mesosystem could be comprised of the relationships between work, family and social life. For individuals growing up in the foster care

system, the mesosystem might include the relationship between social worker and biological family.

Exosystem. Bronfenbrenner (1979) describes the exosystem as “one or more settings that do not involve the developing person as an active participant, but in which events occur that affect, or are affected by what happens in the setting containing the developing person” (p. 25). For a person growing up in the foster care system, an example of the exosystem might include decisions made by the court dependency judge or disciplinary policies established by the child welfare or education agencies.

Macrosystem. The last system that composes Urie Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems is the macrosystem. Bronfenbrenner states that the macrosystem refers to consistencies, in the form and content of lower-order systems (micro, meso, and exo) that exist, or could exist, at the level of subculture or the culture as a whole, along with any belief systems or ideology underlying such consistencies. (p. 26)

An example of macrosystem elements that would impact an individual growing up in the foster care system could be legislation that affects the foster care system or immigration policies that separate families, causing children to enter foster care.

Factors that Contribute to the Academic Success of Foster Youth

The academic experiences of foster youth at the undergraduate and K-12 levels have been explored extensively. Research findings have identified foster youth as one of the most academically vulnerable populations of students (Altshuler, 2003; Zetlin et al., 2006). Studies have found that even when compared to other vulnerable populations of students including English learners, and low-income students, foster students fare worst in regards to academics. However, studies have found that in spite of all the trauma and academic barriers, some students

in foster care have managed to obtain academic success. The literature identified three components that are important when addressing the progression of foster youth student outcomes. These included (a) having a mentor or a permanent positive connection, (b) having social and emotional support, and (c) having the opportunity to learn study skills.

Mentoring/permanent positive connection. Across the board, whether it be college or high school, the literature identified that what mattered most for individuals who experienced the foster care system was “always having someone there to help, or to turn to for support” (Unrau, Dawson, Hamilton, & Bennett, 2017, p. 69). Gordon, Iwamoto, Ward, Potts, and Boyd (2009) defined mentoring as “a positive relationship and contribution by a non-parental adult to the life of a young person” (p. 279). The literature identified mentoring as a key component to the academic success of foster youth whether they are in high school or college (Batsche et al., 2014; Bruster, & Coccoma, 2013; Cox, 2012; Crawford, Tilbury, Creed, & Buys, 2011; Day et al., 2011, 2012; Hass et al., 2014; Kirk & Day, 2011; Lawler, Sayfan, Goodman, Narr, & Cordon, 2014; Merdinger, Hines, Osterling, & Wyatt, 2005; Morton, 2015; Pecora et al., 2006; Shin, 2003; Weinberg et al., 2014). Students who are in foster care have high rates of mobility due to the lack of stability in their living situations (Pecora et al., 2006). A mentor can serve as a stable figure who can provide social and emotional support in the life of a foster child (Batsche et al., 2014; Crawford et al., 2011; Day et al., 2012; Hass et al., 2014; Kirk & Day, 2011; Lawler et al., 2014; Morton, 2015; Pecora et al., 2006). Additionally, a mentor can provide advocacy and intervene on behalf of foster students in different ways from an attorney or social worker (Weinberg et al., 2014). Furthermore, the literature showed that foster youth who lacked a permanent, caring adult in their lives (such as a mentor) also lacked the motivation to succeed in their academics (Crawford et al., 2011; Day et al., 2012). The literature showed that mentors are

often the individuals who provide social and emotional support to foster students. Social and emotional supports have also been identified as important contributing factors in the academic success of foster youth (Batsche et al., 2014; Crawford et al., 2011; Day et al., 2012; Hass et al., 2014; Kirk & Day, 2011; Lawler et al., 2014; Morton, 2015; Pecora et al., 2006).

Social/emotional support. The importance of social and emotional support was prevalent throughout the literature. Hass and colleagues identified social and emotional supports as caring, messages of high expectation, and opportunities to participate in and contribute to social and academic environments (Hass et al., 2014). The literature also attributed confidence to explore career opportunities and make career decisions to the social and emotional support foster students received from positive adults (Crawford et al., 2011). A participant in a study conducted by Day and colleagues (2012) exemplified the impacts of social and emotional support in the academic journey of foster students. The participant stated “I have had two teachers, and they helped me to realize that I could go to college. I never really planned on going to college until this last year. My GPA went from a 1.0 to a 3.1” (p. 1,011). Throughout the literature, social and emotional support was identified as having a significant impact on the academic success of foster students (Crawford et al., 2011; Day et al., 2012; Hass et al., 2014; Lawler et al., 2014; Morton, 2015). Along with social and emotional support, some of the foster students who were identified as successful throughout the literature also possessed study and organizational skills.

Study/organizational skills. The absence of study skills and organizational skills was a contributing factor that inhibited the academic success of foster youth. Tory Cox (2012) described organizational skills as a micro level challenge for students who were placed in foster care. A study conducted by Zetlin and colleagues (2012) found that the lack of basic skills was a challenge that set foster youth apart from their nonfoster youth peers. However, when foster

youth were able to obtain study skills, these contributed to an improvement in their GPA (Weinberg et al., 2014). Bruster and Coccoma (2013) also found that study skills in conjunction with tutoring contributed to foster youth being able to receive their GEDs. The literature showed that providing foster students with mentoring, social/emotional support, and study skills could assist in improving their student outcomes.

K-12 Academic Barriers for Students in Foster Care

The academic experiences of students who have been placed in the foster care system have been explored in great depths. Research in the literature identified five barriers that prevent children in foster care from obtaining success in their academics. From most common to least common as found in the literature, the barriers included (a) the absence of stability and high rates of mobility, (b) the lack of collaboration between systems, (c) behavior issues displayed by foster children in the school setting, (d) emotional factors faced by foster youth including stigma and trauma, and (e) foster students not being up to grade level in regards to their academics. It is important to highlight that all five barriers are interrelated and that all of these must be addressed in order to assist children in foster care succeed in their education.

Absence of stability and high rates of mobility. Two of the most prevalent factors that prevent children in foster care from succeeding in their academics are the absence of stability and the high rates of school and placement mobility. It is very common for children in foster care to change placements. Connell and colleagues (2006) conducted a study that consisted of 5,909 children who were placed in the foster care system in the state of Rhode Island. The findings in the study revealed that the median number of placements for each foster child was two, with a range from one to 37 placements. A different study conducted by Pecora and colleagues (2005) found that a total of 32% of the participants had changed placements eight times or more while

they were in foster care. Change in home placement often parallels change in a school setting. Zetlin and colleagues (2012) explored the experiences of beginning general and special education teachers in instructing students living in the foster care system by conducting a questionnaire that was answered by 91 teachers. The study found that approximately one third of students in the foster care system experienced high levels of school mobility. Some of the foster students began the school year in the school, but within two to four months they were moved. Other students entered the school during the middle of the year and left shortly after. Each time foster children change school, they are set back in their academics by an average of 4-6 months (Hudson-Plush, 2006). Unfortunately the frequent changes in school or placement are often caused by the lack of collaboration and poor coordination between the child welfare and education systems. The lack of collaboration often causes foster students to fall behind in their academics and the frustration sometimes even causes foster students to drop out (Kirk & Day, 2011).

Batsche and colleagues (2014) conducted a study in order to understand the extent to which a national college campaign would resonate with individuals who had emancipated from the foster care system. A total of 27 former foster youth who were enrolled in a post-secondary education institution participated in the study. Findings of the study revealed that frequent academic mobility while in K-12 can have a negative impact on the motivation of students. A participant in the study stated, “You are trying to learn something but you are constantly moving, so now you are getting sidetracked from the main goal that you had which is succeeding in school” (p. 178) One additional problem that arises from school and placement mobility is that neither caregivers nor teachers are able to familiarize themselves with the academic strengths or weaknesses of foster students, making it difficult to advocate for the needs of the students (Zetlin

et al., 2006). It is also important to highlight that students in foster care are suspended and expelled at higher rates than students in the general population (Castrechini, 2009; McMillen et al., 2003). A report that was conducted to analyze the Investments in School Climate and Foster Youth Through the Local Control Accountability Plan stated that 67% of foster youth had been suspended at least once (Faer & Cohen, 2015). School suspension and expulsion also contribute to school mobility. High levels of school mobility have a disappointing effect on the academic outcomes of the students who are in foster care. Additionally, school mobility disrupts foster students' friendships, their participation in extracurricular activities such as sports or school clubs, and it also removes foster students from their community where often times they have developed a support system (Morton, 2015).

Lack of understanding between systems. The second most prevalent factor preventing students in the foster care system from succeeding in their academics, as identified by the literature, was the lack of understanding amongst all systems serving children in foster care. Up until recently children in foster care were an invisible population of students in the public education system, because of their status as wards of the state (Barrat & Berliner, 2013). In addition, the Child Welfare and Institutions code 300, one of the major pieces of legislation that guides the work of child welfare workers is primarily focused on the safety of the child, and makes no reference to the educational outcomes or status of these children (California Legislative Information, 2018). Since the establishment of both the child welfare and the education systems, there was nothing that fortified collaboration between the two, but after years of research and advocacy we now know that in order to improve the academic outcomes of children in foster care, these two systems must work in collaboration (Clemens et al., 2017; Cox,

2012; Ferguson & Wolkow, 2012; Kirk & Day, 2011; McMillen et al., 2003; Morton, 2015; Wulczyn, Smithgall, & Chen, 2009; Zetlin et al., 2006, 2012).

Staff working in both the child-welfare and the education system do not have a good understanding of one another, making academic success for foster youth difficult to attain. One of the participants in a study conducted by Zetlin and colleagues (2006) stated that there wasn't enough support in the school for individuals who are in the foster care system and that school personnel often do not take into consideration what the students are going through outside of school. The participant said, "Whatever you are facing, you are going to bring that to school with you" (p. 168). Findings in the literature also highlighted a lack of clarity as to who is responsible for the educational progress of children who are in foster care (Ferguson & Wolkow, 2012). In a study conducted by Zetlin and colleagues (2012) one of the teachers participating in the study expressed her frustration when stating that "nobody wants to take responsibility for the child. They say to call caregiver or call the birth parent" (p. 9). The same study found that teachers requested in-service training on how to support students in foster care, specifically how to address their behavioral and emotional needs. The lack of understanding between the two systems is often exacerbated by the lack of communication. Teachers often feel frustrated due to social workers suppressing vital information about foster students. Similarly, social workers often feel frustrated with teachers who request confidential information or information that the social worker may consider to be nonessential for the academic wellbeing of the child (Ferguson & Wolkow, 2012).

Communication. Webster's dictionary defines communication as "a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behavior" ("Communication," 2018, para. 1). Methods of communication have increased over

the years, and today there are more methods of communication than ever before. Nonetheless, the literature clearly identified poor communication as one of the primary reason for the lack of understanding between systems (Covey & Merrill, 2008; Gallegos & White, 2013; Horwath & Morrison, 2007; Lane, Turner, & Flores, 2004; Lee, Benson, Klein, & Franke, 2015; Morrison, 1996; Rosenblatt & Rosenblatt, 1999; Salmon, 2004).

Confidentiality. In regards to systems that serve at-risk children, one of the factors that impacted the flow of communication was the issue of confidentiality (Lee et al., 2015; Morrison, 1996; Salmon, 2004). Professionals in the field of child welfare were often unable to communicate helpful information with education entities because of legal limitations (Lee et al., 2015; Morton, 2015). Furthermore, studies found that due to the stigma that is attached to being in foster care, some foster children do not share their experience with others, or only shared it with friends with whom they feel close (Farmer et al., 2013; Michelle, 2015). However, confidentiality does not only block the continuity of communication from the child welfare system to the education system but also from education to child welfare. The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 prevents educational institutions from sharing information in regards to a student's academics or behaviors with an individual who is not an educational rights holder for that student. Although Senate Bill 3472 (Uninterrupted Scholars Act) amends Section 444(b) of the General Education Provisions Act (20 U.S.C. 1232g[b]) and allows for educational institutions to share academic information with a foster child's social worker, the information is still not being communicated with the foster parents. One study shared the experience of a foster parent unable to obtain an IEP for her foster child, due to not being the educational rights holder (Lee et al., 2015). For foster parents to obtain an IEP, they must be the educational rights holder for that student. It is important to highlight that just because biological parents lose their parental

rights, they do not automatically lose educational rights over their children's academics (Zetlin et al., 2012). Often times biological parents refuse to give up their status as educational rights holder, even when their children are in an out of home placement (Lee et al., 2015). One additional issue identified by the literature as having a negative impact on the communication between child welfare and education was the lack of common language.

Lack of common language. Within the issue of communication, one of the primary barriers, as identified by the literature, was the lack of common language (Horwath & Morrison, 2007; Morrison, 1996; Salmon, 2004). One study found that the absence of common definitions, prevented multiple agencies in collaboration to effectively serve children and their families (Salmon, 2004). Professionals in each particular field have familiarized themselves with the acronyms or pieces of legislation that most impact their day to day work (Powers, Edwards, Blackman, & Wegmann, 2013). However, it can be challenging for a person who is not immersed in that world to have that same knowledge. In a study exploring elements of multiagency collaboration between mental health and education, one respondent stated, "It's just that the language is very different ... and though they have similar goals they're trying to reach, their missions are very different" (Powers et al., 2013, p. 661). Lack of common language is one of the barriers to communication. Additionally the literature emphasized the importance of communication in order to build trust. Since communication and trust go hand in hand, it is no surprise that communication and trust were commonly identified as missing components that contributed to the lack of collaboration and coordination between systems.

Behavior issues displayed by foster children in the school setting. A third element that the literature identified as a barrier for students who were placed in the foster care system was the behavior issues these children often exhibit (Bruce, Naccarato, Hopson, & Morrelli, 2010;

Ferguson & Wolkow, 2012; McMillen et al., 2003; Scherr, 2007; Zetlin et al., 2006, 2012). Studies have identified some of the behaviors displayed by children in care as demanding, immature, attention seeking, anxious, and over-compliant, amongst others (Zetlin et al., 2012). Kortenkamp and Ehrle (2002) compared disciplinary actions encountered by 819 foster youth living in foster care placements with 67, 865 youth living in their own homes. Kortenkamp and Ehrle found that 32% of the individuals who had been placed in foster care had been suspended or expelled, in contrast to 13% of the second group. Furthermore, Zetlin and colleagues (2012) found that students in foster care displayed aggression, and anger, and they struggled with working in harmony with their peers. In the same study, Zetlin and colleagues found that behavior was the greatest challenge encountered by the teachers. Participants in the study stated that some of the foster students were needy and often displayed feelings of abandonment and sadness. Burns and colleagues (2004) conducted a study consisting of 3,803 children who had been placed in foster care between the ages of 2-14. Their findings identified 47.9% of the participants as having clinically significant emotional or behavioral problems. Behavioral issues have been found to be common amongst young people who are placed in the foster care system. However it is important to remember that oftentimes the behavior is a manifestation of the trauma these youngsters have encountered. McMillen and colleagues (2003) conducted a study that documented the academic experiences of 262 youth in foster care. Their findings revealed that youth who had encountered heavier instances of emotional abuse had greater behavioral issues in school and they were also more likely to fail a grade.

Emotional factors faced by foster youth including stigma and trauma. The fourth barrier that prevents students in foster care from reaching their academic potential as identified by the literature, is the emotional factors often faced by the young people who have been placed

in foster care. Amongst these were the stigma and the trauma that haunts these students. More often than not, children who enter the foster care system do so because they experience reoccurring abuse and/or neglect at the hands of the adults who are supposed to care and provide for them. It is not uncommon for the reoccurring maltreatment to develop into complex trauma (Greeson et al., 2011). Cook and colleagues (2005) stated that complex trauma is detrimental to the development of multiple domains in children and youth including: attachment, cognition, self-concept, behavioral control, and affect regulation amongst others. Clemens and colleagues (2017) conducted a study to understand the perspective of former foster youth on the graduation gap and their experience in school. A total of 16 individuals who had been in the foster care system participated in the study. Findings revealed that the emotional ramifications of being in the foster care system had extreme repercussions on the educational experiences of the students. One of the participants stated, “You’re not just dealing with school and learning school things. You’re learning how to stay calm and not be angry at life...you’re dealing with a lot more than just going to school and learning the ABC’s” (Clemens et al., 2017, p. 70). Participants of the study further emphasized that the emotional consequences of being placed in the foster care system are both largely underestimated and misunderstood. Clemens and colleagues also found that the stigma of being in foster care pushed students to disengage from school. One of the participants described the stigma in the following terms “a black kid coming in the middle of the school year being dropped off by a white lady” (Clemens et al., 2017, p. 72). A different study conducted by Morton (2015) found that amongst the emotional factors that interfered in the academic achievement of foster students were feelings of disempowerment, self-defeating attitudes, and anger. One of the participants shared her experience of being placed in special education due to her behavior. By the time she entered eighth grade, the young lady was placed

in a general education classroom, however she had spent so much time in special education that when she matriculated to eighth grade she was behind her peers. According to Buckley, Lotty, and Meldon (2016) children who experience complex trauma remain in a state of hyper-arousal for long periods of time which prevents certain parts of the brain from being activated. These children are too busy surviving which further explains their inability to focus and excel in their academics. Childhood trauma may create long-lasting impact on an individual's functioning and health (Mullen, Martin, Anderson, Romans, & Herbison, 1996). Childhood trauma may also lead to emotional and behavioral disorders or learning disabilities (Day et al., 2011). Given the various types of trauma encountered by children in the foster care system, these students need a higher level of support to excel in their academics (Crawford et al., 2011; Day et al., 2011; Weinberg et al., 2014).

Foster students not being up to grade level. A less common barrier but still worthy of note is the fact that many times students in foster care are not up to grade level. According to Zetlin and colleagues (2012), many of the general education teachers were troubled by the academic backgrounds of their students who were associated with the foster care system. Teachers stated that often times their foster students were behind grade level and had difficulty catching up with the other students. Other studies have also found that children in foster care struggle performing at grade level and were more likely to repeat a grade (Courtney et al., 2004; Pecora et al., 2005). A study conducted by Shin (2003) explored the academic experiences of 152 foster youth in a Midwestern state, who were in 10th, 11th, and 12th grade. Findings revealed that one fifth of the participants had dropped out of school, and one third of the participants whose mean age was 17.5 were reading below sixth grade level. Furthermore, Shin ascertained that 31% of the participants exhibited reading skills between sixth and eighth grade.

Unfortunately, for many youth who are in foster care, not being up to grade level haunts them even as they enter college, for they are often unprepared for the academic rigor they will encounter in higher education.

Summary of proceeding sections. It is difficult to determine if any one particular barrier causes another, however there is no doubt that the barriers identified by the literature are dynamic and interrelated. It is well documented that children in foster care experience significant trauma. More often than not the trauma manifest itself as behavioral challenges (Karnik, 2000). Behavioral challenges cause child to get kicked out of school or her or his placement, which causes the child to move (Zetlin et al., 2012). Because of the lack of understanding between the child-welfare and education systems, the child's records may not be transferred on time, causing the school enrollment of the child to be delayed (Lee et al., 2015; Morton, 2015). The child falls behind in his or her academics, causing the child to become frustrated because she cannot catch up to her peers (Courtney et al., 2004; Pecora et al. 2005). The child disengages from school as she may see no value in creating relationships that are bound to end sooner rather than later, as that is what has occurred historically (Clemens et al., 2017). The child may act up and get kicked out of school, and even get kicked out of the home if the foster family is not able to transport her to the new school. The factors identified in the literature are interrelated and multidirectional and unfortunately, these only exacerbate over time. Sadly, these barriers are not automatically removed once the child exits the K-12 education system. Many foster youth continue to struggle with their education beyond high school.

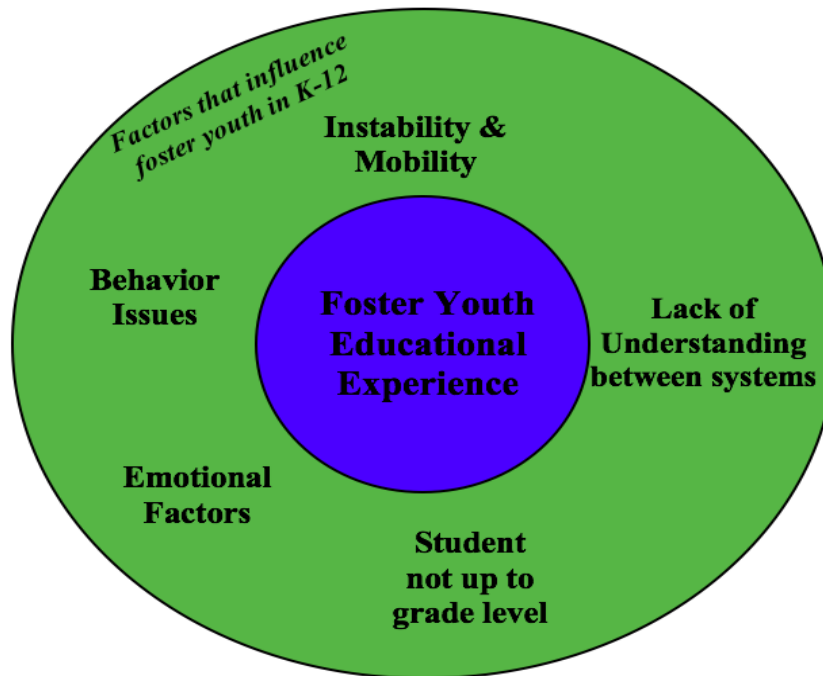


Figure 2. Factors that influence foster youth in K-12.

Barriers in Higher Education for Students in Foster Care

The literature identified a number of barriers encountered by foster youth as they attempted to advance in higher education. Amongst the difficulties identified were challenges around (a) finances, (b) lack of knowledge about higher education and opportunities available to facilitate the journey, (c) lack of preparation for the academic rigor in college, (d) lack of understanding between systems, and lastly (e) trauma and mental health issues.

Finances. The literature identified financial issues as the greatest barrier foster youth encounter when attempting to obtain a college education. Unrau and colleagues (2017) conducted a study to evaluate different components of a college support program that was designed to support students who had aged out of the foster care system. A total of 95 students who had participated in the program completed a 44 question survey to evaluate the services provided by the program. Findings of the study revealed the importance of financial aid, and housing amongst others. The findings are not surprising, particularly since the cost of attending

college has increased in the last year, averaging a total of \$20,090 for the 2016-2017 school year (College Board, 2017) While some college students are able to count on financial support from their parents, young adults who emancipate from the foster care system do not have that luxury.

Being able to access the financial aid available to former foster students was an additional barrier these youngsters faced while attempting to obtain a college education. Batsche and colleagues (2014) found that the participants in their study struggled with being able to gather the documentation necessary to be able to demonstrate financial independence, which would increase their financial aid. One of the participants stated, “I had to tell them that my mom was dead and I didn’t know who my dad was. I had to write a long letter, get it notarized...I was only 17” (Batsche et al., 2014, p. 179). Participants also expressed their frustration with the system, particularly the lack of communication between staff and students in regards to the documentation necessary to access financial resources, and also the long lines that sometimes required the students to wait up to 6 hours.

A different study conducted by Salazar and colleagues (2016) explored the strengths, challenges, and supports foster youth experienced in college. A total of 248 former foster youth participated in the survey which consisted of three open ended questions. The findings of the study consisted of 7 global themes. Amongst these were finances and logistics. Participants in the study expressed their worries about receiving enough funding to cover their academic expenses for the year. Participants also expressed anxiety due to the uncertainty of whether their financial aid would be processed on time, which would impact their ability to purchase text books, pay rent and obtain groceries. Conversely, when former foster youth had access to financial resources they were able to excel in their college journey.

Hass and colleagues conducted a study in an effort to understand the internal and external resources that allowed young adults who had been removed from their biological parents to complete a post-secondary educational program, or at minimum, achieve junior standing in a 4-year institution. A total of 44 individuals participated in the study. Participants in the study made reference to the assistance provided by agencies. Amongst the type of assistance was the financial support provided by the agencies in the form of scholarships (Hass et al., 2014). A different study conducted by Kirk and Day (2011) explored the impact of a small scale, targeted education program designed to assist transitioning foster youth. Participants of the study stated that they learned the most about campus life and scholarships available for college. One of the participants stated, "I learned how to get money, a lot scholarships and getting money for books and how to pay for room and food and all the stuff you need, like, that's so important" (Kirk & Day, 2011, p. 1,176) Having access to financial resources is important for any student attempting to complete higher education, but for individuals who do not have the support of a family it can be even more impactful. Findings in the literature revealed that the barriers around finances were not only about affording tuition. For students in foster care, their access to financial resources determined whether they would have their basic needs met such as food and shelter.

Students are not prepared for the academic rigor of college. An additional common theme identified by the literature as a barrier encountered by foster youth when they reach higher education, was the lack of preparedness for the academic rigor of college. The literature also identified the constant change in schools at the K-12 level as one of the primary reasons for foster students not being prepared for the academic expectations of college. During their evaluation of the college support program for foster youth, Unrau and colleagues (2017) identified academic support as one of the components of the program that supported students

transitioning from foster care into a 4-year university. One of the required courses offered to program participants addressed necessary skills that are “not always part of the college preparation training that students with a background in foster care have received.” (Unrau et al., 2017, p. 66) The researchers’ findings were consistent with prior research, which identified that students from foster care are less prepared for the academic challenges of college when compared to their peers who had not spent time in foster care.

A different study conducted by Day and colleagues (2011) found that students who had been placed in the foster care system were more likely to drop out of college even when compared to low income and first-generation college students who had not spent time in the foster care system. In identifying some of the reasons why individuals who had spent time in foster care were more likely to not complete college, Day and colleagues stated that foster youth who enter college do not have the support necessary when dealing with the stressors of college coursework and the stressors of college life, further emphasizing the impact that the lack of preparation for the academic rigor of college life has on foster students. Salazar and colleagues (2016) also found that academic challenges such as reading, writing and studying posed significant challenges for individuals who had spent time in foster care. One of the participants in the study stated he “[I] lacked skills that I missed during foster care transitions in high school. Can’t do well in college without knowing how to write” (Salazar et al., 2016, p. 273). Many factors contribute to students from the foster care system not being prepared for the academic rigor of college, including the constant school mobility that they encountered at the K-12 level. In addition, in 2004 Smithgall, Gladden, Howard, Goerge, and Courtney conducted a study for Chapin Hall with the University of Chicago to assess the educational experiences of children who were living in out of home care in Illinois. Findings of the study revealed that students who

are in foster care are more likely to attend schools that are in high poverty areas, underfunded, and low performing. All of these factors combined, have a negative effect on a foster student's ability to excel in college.

Lack of knowledge about higher education. An additional barrier worthy of note was the lack of knowledge that foster youth receive in regards to support programs available to them. A study conducted by Bruce and colleagues (2010) found that youth who are in the foster care system are often not informed about the opportunities available to them to finance their college education, and many times they are also unfamiliar with the college application process. Dworsky and Perez (2010) conducted a study to examine the implementation of campus support programs that assist individuals who have aged out of the foster care system. They conducted phone interviews with 10 program administrators, and they also conducted a web based survey and received participation from 98 students. According to Dworsky and Perez, the program administrators expressed concerns with the lack of information foster youth receive regarding post-secondary educational options available to them. Furthermore, the program administrators shared their disappointment with the fact that foster youth are often not encouraged to pursue a post-secondary education, despite the importance an education has in the labor market. In a different study, Hernandez and Naccarato (2010) explored college programs nationwide that provide scholarship and support services to foster care alumni who are pursuing a post-secondary degree. Hernandez and Naccarato found that eight out of the ten programs focused their outreach to high school students in an effort to raise college awareness for young individuals who are in the foster care system. Additionally, Wolanin (2005) conducted a report for the Institute for higher education policy. Wolanin stated that many foster youth who qualify for college do not attend higher education institutions because they are not aware of the opportunities available to

them. Findings in the literature revealed that foster youth lack knowledge in regards to the opportunities available to them to finance their college education, assuming the cost of attending college is unaffordable, some foster youth may be discouraged to apply (Bruce et al., 2010; Day et al., 2012; Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010; Wolanin, 2005).

One additional factor that complicates matters in regards to not having access to information about educational opportunities for foster youth, is that there are age limits for many of the waivers, scholarships, and programs for foster youth pursuing post-secondary degrees. Hernandez, Day, and Henson (2017) performed a comparative analysis of 22 tuition waiver programs in the country. Findings in their study indicated that many of the waivers not only had age limits, but also limits in the number of semesters the waivers could be used. The researchers also found that foster youth usually take longer than their non-foster youth peers in attaining degrees, further limiting their access to resources, particularly those that have age limits. The literature on the quest for higher education for foster youth identified the lack of knowledge as a barrier that prevents foster students from pursuing a post-secondary degree.

Lack of understanding between systems. Less common than other barriers, yet still impactful for foster youth attempting to pursue a post-secondary education is the lack of understanding between systems. Day and colleagues (2011) conducted a study to examine if students who were in foster care were more likely to drop out of college when compared to low-income, first generation college students who had not been in foster care. Day and colleagues stated that student services personnel at many of the post-secondary institutions are unfamiliar and unprepared to address the needs of foster students. This finding is further supported by Salazar and colleagues (2016) who stated that many college campuses aren't adequately prepared

to meet the needs of foster care alumni, largely because their needs are not well understood by campus staff.

Similarly, Merdinger and colleagues (2005) conducted a study to understand the factors that impact the academic performance of individuals who had spent time in the foster care system. A total of 216 individuals who had emancipated from the foster care system and were attending 4-year universities participated in the study. Out of the 216 participants, 63.8% stated that the foster care system did not prepare them very well for college. Moreover, Crawford et al. (2011) interviewed individuals who had spent time in foster care, kinship care providers, and child protective caseworkers in efforts to understand the views of career development for in care youth. A total of 25 young people completed the study, along with 14 case workers, and 27 carers. When case workers were asked to share their knowledge in regards to the programs available to support youth who had been involved with the foster care system in making decisions to further their education, all of the case workers shared that career development was not included in their case worker training. The caseworkers also admitted having limited knowledge regarding the services that could assist young people in the development of their career. When the kinship carers were interviewed they identified “administrative and bureaucratic processes” (Crawford et al., 2011, p. 469) that prevented them from assisting young people in making the transition from school to work. Amongst issues identified by the carers was the failure of the child-welfare agencies to provide written consents for students to participate in extra-curricular activities. Lack of agency collaboration was identified as one of the barriers that inhibits individuals who have spent time in foster care from obtaining a post-secondary degree. Lack of awareness of the higher education system in case workers and the lack of awareness of

the child-welfare system in education professionals is contributing to the negative educational outcomes of individuals who have spent time in foster care.

Trauma/mental health doesn't go away when youth enter college. The last theme identified by the literature as a barrier that inhibits individuals who have spent time in the foster care system from completing higher education is the trauma and mental health issues that follow them from foster care to college. Findings in a study conducted by Salazar and colleagues (2016) revealed that mental health challenges were common amongst former foster youth pursuing post-secondary degrees. Some of the mental health challenges described by participants included depression, anxiety, and PTSD. Other study participants battled eating disorders, shame, and feelings of abandonment. Conversely, the same study identified good mental health as integral to academic success. One of the participants in the study stated, "I would encourage foster care youth currently pursuing their degrees to seek emotional support" (Salazar et al., 2016, p. 271).

A different study conducted by Huang, Fernandez, Rhoden, and Joseph (2018) looked into the experiences of mentors and program staff who provide support services to homeless and foster youth on a university campus. One of the most significant challenges identified by the mentors was the mental health encountered by their mentees. One of the mentors shared that his relationship with his mentee ended due to the mentee being hospitalized in a mental health facility in the middle of the semester. A different mentor shared that his mentee was at risk of suicide and had a history of suicide attempts. The mentors expressed their lack of professional knowledge to deal with the mental health barriers encountered by their mentees. In a different study Unrau, Font, and Rawls (2012) stated that the stressors of college life may "trigger deep-seated unresolved issues" (p. 81) for these individuals who have experienced foster care. Issues that may seem minor to an outsider would impact a former foster youth on a much greater level,

due to their experiences in foster care. An additional study conducted by Hallett, Westland, and Mo (2018) looked into the experiences of foster youth who were attending a community college located in Northern California. They conducted a total of 15 interviews, seven of those with former foster youth, and the other eight with stakeholders at the community college. Findings in the research described how the impact of childhood trauma affected the academic, social, and personal lives of former foster youth who were navigating higher education. The researchers stated that the participants were constantly at odds between “pursuing an education in order to achieve long term goals, and struggling to negotiate obstacles to meeting short-term needs” (Hallett, Westland, & Mo, 2018, p. 50). The findings in this study align with other studies that highlight trauma and mental health as a barrier for former foster youth pursuing a post-secondary degree. The literature outlined that the trauma and mental health barriers individuals in foster care experience at the K-12 level continue to follow them in higher education. The pain, trauma, and mental health issues are not automatically resolved when a youth emancipates from foster care. For some of these students the trauma is so severe that it intervenes with their ability to successfully complete a post-secondary degree.

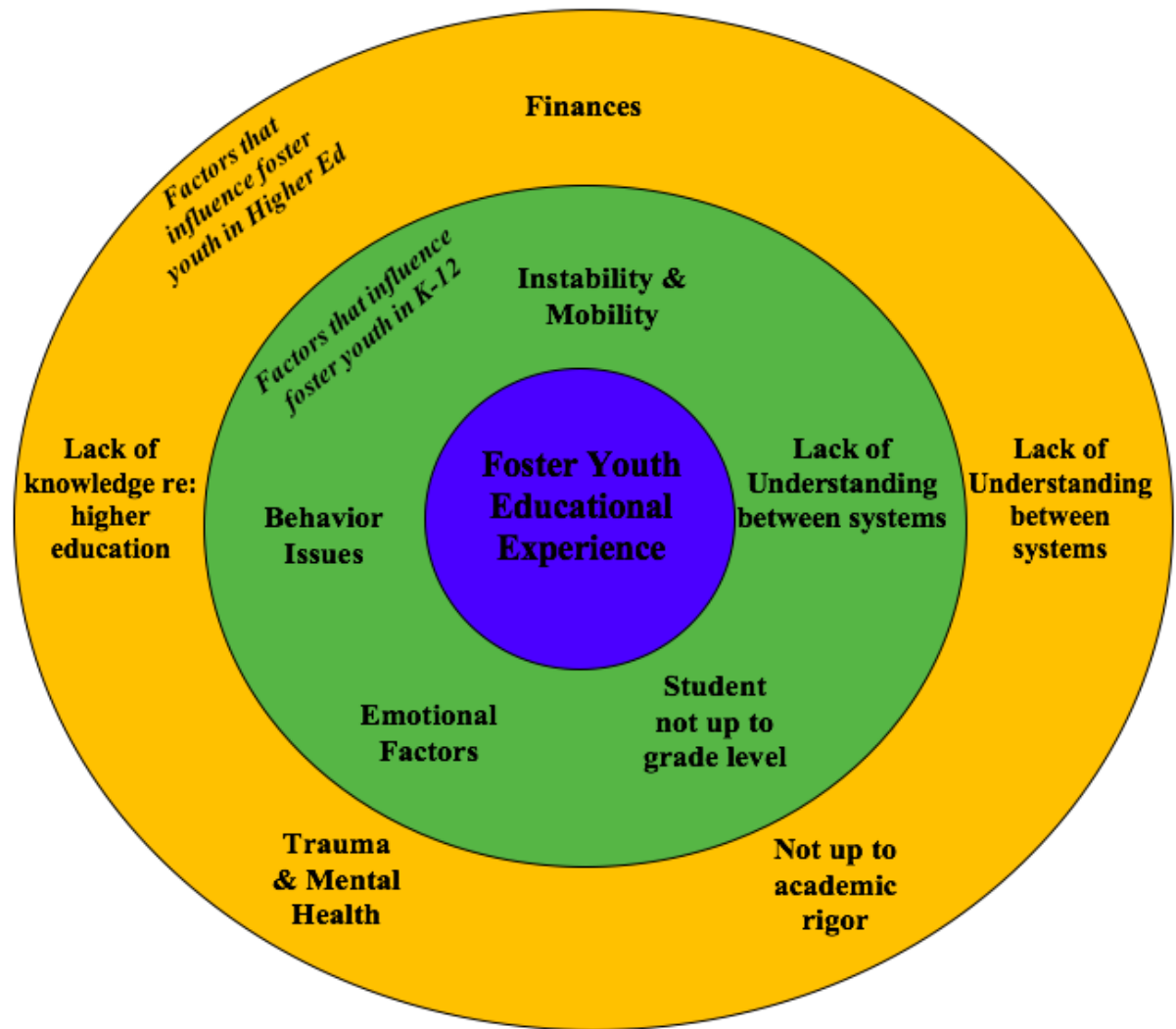


Figure 3. Factors that influence foster youth in higher ed and K-12.

Barriers in K-12 and Higher Education

The literature addressing the relationship between foster care and education identified multiple dynamic and complex barriers that inhibit foster youth from excelling in their academics at both the K-12 and higher education levels. Some barriers were present at the K-12 levels and continued to follow foster youth through their academic journey in higher education. These included the emotional factors as they were identified at the K-12 level and trauma and mental health as they were described in higher education. At the K-12 level, findings in the literature

revealed that foster students struggled with focusing on their academics due to not being able to shut off thoughts of the abuse and neglect they had endured (Clemens et al., 2017). Similarly, in higher education, students described their battles with mental health challenges such as depression, anxiety and PTSD. Other students identified their battles with eating disorders, shame, and feelings of abandonment (Salazar et al., 2016).

An additional barrier that was identified in the K-12 literature that was also present in higher education was the fact that foster students were often not up to grade level. Within higher education this barrier was identified as students not being up to the academic rigor of college. Within the K-12 system the literature revealed that students in foster care were more likely to repeat a grade in comparison to their non-foster youth peers (Courtney et al., 2004; Pecora et al., 2005). Within the higher education system, the literature revealed that students in foster care were less prepared for the academic challenges of college, when compared to their peers who had never spent time in the foster care system (Unrau et al., 2017).

The last element identified by the literature that was present in the K-12 academic journey of students in foster care and also followed the students through higher education was the lack of understanding between the systems serving foster students. At the K-12 level, the literature identified issues of communication and confidentiality as some of the primary reasons for the lack of understanding between the child serving systems. Teachers described their frustrations with case workers suppressing vital information. Similarly, caseworkers also felt frustrated with teachers who were requesting confidential information about the child (Ferguson & Wolkow; 2012). Within higher education studies showed that student services personnel were often unprepared to meet the needs of foster care alumni in post-secondary institutions (Day et al., 2011).

Analysis of the Literature

The following is the researcher's rendering of relevant micro, meso, and macro dimensions suggested by the literature. This rendering is based on her professional knowledge and experience within the child welfare system.

The literature findings generally suggest that barriers emerge from the children's own attitudes, behaviors, and deficits. However, based on the researcher's experience as a child welfare worker, the barriers encountered by foster youth in regards to academics are often shaped and intensified by systemic factors. The following section uses a different lens in looking at the barriers, and identifies additional dimensional factors that may influence barriers in the education of foster youth.

The barriers identified by the literature as encountered by foster youth are not solely because of their experience in foster care. Rather education institutions have an opportunity to moderate and mediate the childhood trauma of their students. When education institutions are able to do this for their foster students, they will then have the capacity to implement the same practices for all students. However, if schools do not equip themselves with the knowledge and resources to support the foster youth population, they could be at risk of re-traumatizing their students. Furthermore, it is important to highlight that some of the barriers as identified by the literature are focused on the student being flawed rather than looking at the system. Some barriers are rooted in systemic dynamics, and other barriers are related to individual educators for example, biases they might carry with them. Biases such as those that were identified in the study conducted by Zetlin et al. (2012) when educators described the behavior of foster youth as demanding, immature, attention seeking, anxious, and over compliant. Figure 4 outlines the same barriers that were identified in the literature, and uses an alternate lens to place them in

concentric spheres. This graphic illustrates how identified barriers might manifest in concurrent ways, including at student levels, staff levels, and systemic levels.

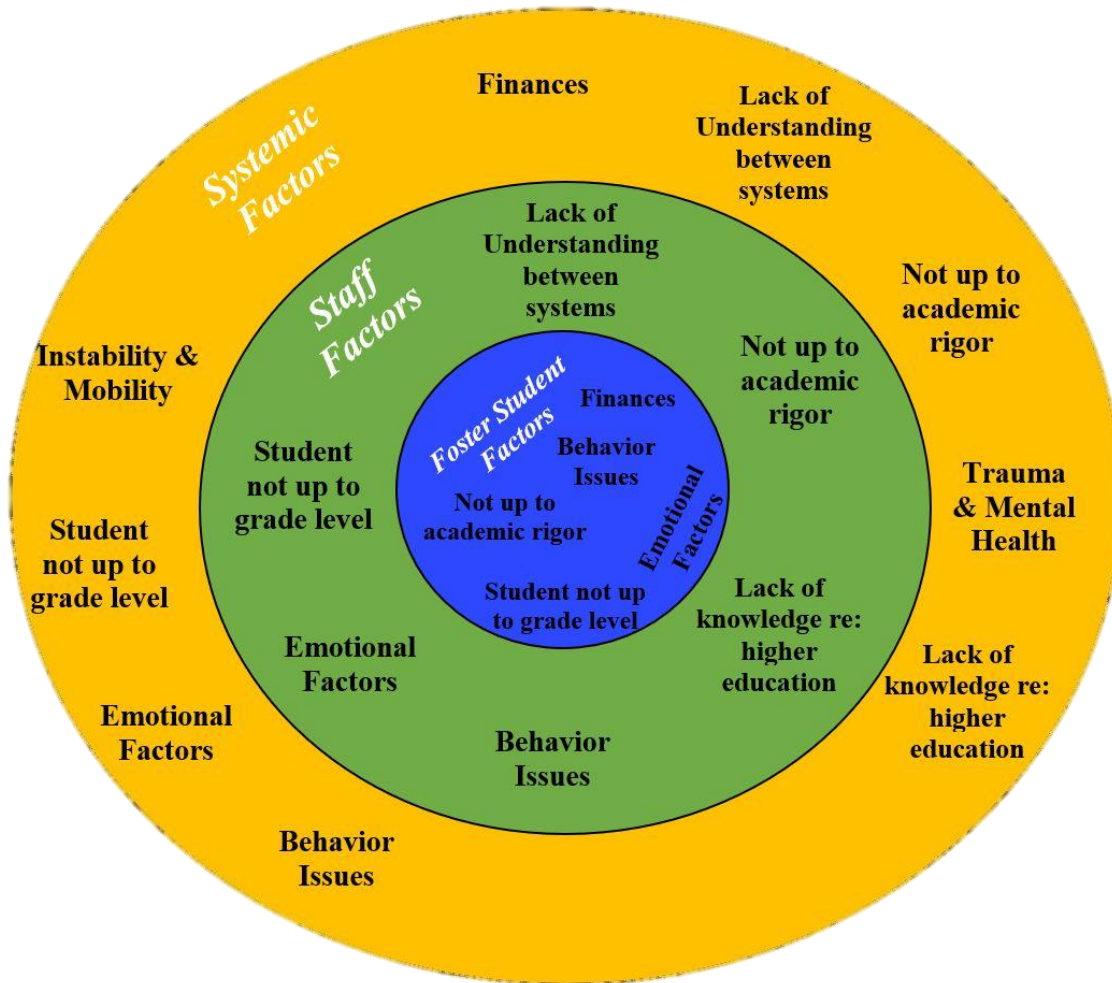


Figure 4. Barriers to foster youth’s educational success.

Foster student-based factors. Some of the barriers related most immediately to the student include finances, not being up to grade level, behavior issues, emotional factors and not being able to meet the academic rigor of college. In regards to finances, the student could work a part time or full time job to help subsidize for both school and living expenses. The student could also learn coping mechanisms that might help when the student becomes frustrated. Along the

same lines, the foster student could obtain support from a therapist in efforts to ameliorate some of the emotional factors that get in the way of academic success. Finally, in order to address the lack of preparedness for the academic rigor of college or not being up to grade level with in the K-12 education system, the student could ask for additional support in the form of tutoring or by asking for additional support from the teachers or professors. These are some areas where the foster student might have some influence to either ameliorate or exacerbate the situation.

Staff-based factors. In addition to the factors whose locus is within or closely associated with students themselves, some factors (including many of the student-based factors) may be caused or influenced by staff who are working with the students. Some of these factors include students not being up to grade level, emotional factors, behavior issues, lack of knowledge regarding higher education, students not being up to academic rigor, and the lack of understanding between systems. This is not to say that staff are fully culpable of foster youth having these barriers while pursuing an education, rather staff attitudes, preconceptions, unawareness, relational dynamics, and actions or lack of actions from staff could influence all of these barriers. For example, students not being up to grade level, or the lack of preparedness for the academic rigor of college could be impacted by teachers if they choose or choose to not provide their foster students with extra support. For emotional and behavioral issues, staff biases could impact the ways in which they interact with foster students, which in turn would impact the emotional factors and the behavioral issues of foster students. Staff could also have an impact on the lack of knowledge in regards to higher education as a barrier for foster youth pursuing post-secondary degrees if they do not familiarize themselves with this knowledge. The same goes for the lack of understanding between systems. This factor could also be influenced by staff if they choose or choose to not become familiar with the various systems.

System-based factors. Lastly, it is important to note that all child serving systems have some impact on the barriers identified in the literature. System policies and practices such as the various discipline policies (both within child welfare and education), policies relating to accessing services, and policies around confidentiality and communication all have an impact on the following barriers: instability and mobility, students not being up to grade level, emotional factors, behavioral issues, finances, lack of understanding between systems, foster students not being able to function with the academic rigor of college, the trauma and mental health that impacts foster students, and also the lack of knowledge in regards to higher education. As the literature revealed, the systems were designed to meet a purpose. For child welfare the purpose is to keep the children safe, for education the purpose is to educate children. The various policies and procedures including those of confidentiality and communication have a significant impact on the barriers encountered by foster youth.

Chapter Summary

Few if any studies exist in regards to foster youth in graduate programs. However, many studies explore the academic experiences of foster youth at the K-12 level. Many studies also explore the relationship between foster care and experiences in higher education. This review of the literature highlights over three decades of legislative efforts that have attempted to ameliorate the academic outcomes of young people who were placed into foster care. One of the most zealous efforts was made in recent years with the passage of California Senate Bill 91, which amends section 42238.02 of the Education Code. Furthermore, and for the first time ever, SB 91 identifies foster youth as a subgroup of students who are eligible for additional resources. In addition to recognizing various state and federal efforts, this chapter is also partly composed of a theoretical framework made up of three theories that will allow the researcher to better

understand the abilities of individuals who spent time in foster care and were then able to obtain graduate level degrees.

The three theories identified in the framework are identity development, self-efficacy, and resilience theory. Findings in the literature of identity development reveal that negative life experiences have a negative impact on the development of identity. Furthermore, findings in the literature support Charles Cooley's (1922) looking glass theory, which states that identity development is heavily influenced by our own perception of how others view us. This theory if true, can have significant ramifications on individuals with a background of foster care, particularly since these individuals have commonly described feelings of being unwanted or disposable. The next theory in the theoretical framework is self-efficacy. Findings in the literature of self-efficacy reveal that self-efficacy is a strong predictor of academic success. Additionally, findings in the literature of self-efficacy reveal that self-efficacy becomes stronger when individuals have supportive relationships with others who believe in their abilities. The last theory that completes this theoretical framework is resilience theory. In efforts to better understand resilience theory, the researcher explored Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory to better understand the role of the environment and the relationships of the many individuals who are in a foster youth's life. Similar to the self-efficacy literature, findings in the literature of resilience revealed that supportive relationships is the most common contributing factor to resilience. After reviewing literature that supports the theoretical framework, the researcher then explored literature in regards to foster care and education. The literature regarding foster care and education was ultimately divided into three major themes, which include: (a) factors that contribute to the academic success of foster youth, (b) barriers at the K-12 levels, and (c) barriers in higher education.

The literature identified factors that contribute to the academic success of individuals who have been placed into foster care. Findings in the literature inform us that three common elements contribute to the success of individuals who have spent time in foster care and were able to excel in their academic journey. The three factors are: (a) mentoring/permanent positive connections, (b) social and emotional support, and (c) study/organizational skills. The second theme in the literature of foster care and education captured the barriers encountered by foster youth while they are trying to obtain an education at the K-12 level. The findings in the literature identified five common elements that inhibit foster youth from successfully obtaining an education. The five themes identified are: (a) the absence of stability and high rates of mobility, (b) the lack of understanding between systems, (c) behavior issues displayed by foster children in the school setting, (d) emotional factors faced by foster youth including stigma and trauma, and (e) foster students not being up to grade level in regards to their academics. The last and final major theme in the literature of foster care and education was in regards to the barriers encountered by foster youth when they reached higher education.

Findings in the literature identified five common elements that inhibited foster youth from successfully obtaining a postsecondary degree. The five themes identified were: (a) finances, (b) lack of knowledge about higher education and opportunities available to facilitate the journey, (c) lack of preparation for the academic rigor in college, (d) lack of understanding between systems, and lastly (e) trauma and mental health issues. Given the findings of the literature which primarily focused on the challenges foster youth face, when attempting to obtain an education, it is beneficial to know how some individuals managed to overcome the barriers and reach some of the highest levels of academia.

Chapter Three: Research Design and Methodology

The primary goal of this chapter is to describe the research design for this study. This chapter provides a description of the methodology and rationale, setting, population, sample, and sampling procedure. This chapter also covers human subject considerations, instrumentation, data collection procedures, efforts to manage the data, and the process for analyzing the data.

Study Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study is to explore the lived experiences of former foster youth who have completed graduate level academic programs in order to discover and describe the elements that these individuals believe led to their academic success. For the purposes of this study, academic success will refer to the completion of a graduate level program.

Research Question

The primary research question for this study is: What do former foster youth who have completed graduate level programs report as elements that have contributed to their academic success?

Research Methodology and Rationale of Study Design

This study uses a qualitative approach and phenomenological methodology. In-depth interviews were conducted with six adults who spent time in foster care before they turned 18 years of age, lived in a foster care setting for at least a year, and who obtained a master's level or higher degree. The researcher conducted the semi-structured interviews, two of these were done face-to-face, two of them were done via Skype and two were done over the phone.

According to Creswell (2013), "Qualitative research begins with assumptions and the use of interpretive/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the

meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (Creswell, 2013, p. 44). Creswell further stated, “The final report includes the voices of the participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, a complex description and interpretation of the problem, and its contribution to the literature or a call for change” (Creswell, 2013, p. 44). Creswell also communicates that qualitative research should be conducted when we want to empower individuals to share their experiences. Given the limited literature in regards to individuals who have spent time in foster care and have obtained graduate level degrees, conducting a qualitative study could provide information to enrich the current literature.

The method of the qualitative study for this research is a phenomenological study, “A phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (Creswell, 2013, p. 76). Creswell (2013) further communicates that phenomenologists concentrate on an experience that all participants have in common. The researcher utilized the phenomenological method in an effort to better understand the meaning of the foster care experience and the impact it could have on the resilience, self-efficacy, and identity development of individuals who have completed graduate programs.

For the purposes of this study, data was collected via in-depth interviews. Creswell (2013) proposes that interviewing is one of the two forms of data collection commonly utilized in approaches to research, including phenomenological studies. For this research study, interview questions were open ended and semi structured and in-depth in an effort to better understand the impact that being placed into foster care might have had on the resilience, self-efficacy, and identity development of individuals who have completed graduate programs.

Credibility/Trustworthiness

Shenton (2004) emphasized the importance of addressing credibility when conducting a qualitative study. Shenton highlighted a number of provisions that can be implemented in efforts to increase the credibility of a qualitative study. The researcher utilized four of the provisions as identified by Shenton, including (a) tactics to help ensure the honesty in informants, (b) frequent debriefing sessions, (c) member checks, and (d) thick description of the phenomenon under scrutiny.

Honesty of informants. Shenton (2004) states that some of the tactics that ensure honesty in informants who are participating in the study include providing each individual with the opportunity to refuse to participate. Additionally, Shenton states participants should be encouraged to be honest in their responses from the outset of each interview session, and that the researcher should establish rapport by informing the participants that “there are no right answers to the question that will be asked” (p. 67). In order to help ensure honesty in informants, the researcher was very explicit in stating that participating in the study is voluntary and should someone refuse to participate, there will be no repercussions. The researcher reiterated this statement again at the beginning of the interview.

Frequent debriefing sessions. An additional tactic recommended by Shenton (2004) to increase the credibility of the study is to conduct frequent debriefing sessions between the researcher and his or her supervisors. In this case, debriefing sessions occurred between the dissertation committee members and the researcher. Shenton proposes that during debriefing sessions alternative approaches could be discussed. Debriefing sessions provided an opportunity for the interviewer to widen her vision, and they provided a platform for a sounding board where the investigator developed interpretations and ideas. Lastly, Shenton states that the debriefing

sessions may assist the researcher “in recognizing her own biases and preferences” (p. 67). The researcher implemented frequent debriefing sessions, by maintaining constant contact with the dissertation chair and other committee members throughout the process of the study. As the researcher completed interview sessions with study participants, she reached out to committee members to debrief.

Member checks. The third provision implemented to increase the credibility of the study was for the researcher to conduct member checks. Shenton (2004) along with other authors identifies member check as “the single most important provision that can be made to bolster a study’s credibility” (p. 68). One way that the researcher conducted member check was by asking study participants to read the transcripts containing the dialogue they participated in.

Thick description. The final element that the researcher implemented in order to increase the credibility of the study was to incorporate a thick description of the phenomenon under scrutiny. Shenton (2004) states that detailed descriptions assist in conveying the situations that have been investigated and also the context that surrounds them. In efforts to incorporate this element and increase the credibility of the study, the researcher asked semi structured, open ended questions to allow study participants to be as descriptive as possible about their experiences.

Setting

This study focused on individuals who spent time in the foster care system in the United States of America and who also managed to obtain an education level of a master’s degree or above, also in the United States. A portion of the study was conducted face to face and in locations convenient to the respondents, whenever it was possible. In situations where it was not

feasible to conduct face-to-face interviews, modern technology such as, a phone call or Skype were utilized.

Population, Sample, and Sampling Procedures

Population. The population for this research study consisted of former foster youth who completed an advance degree program in the United States between the ages of 25-40.

Sample. The sample size for this research study consisted of 6 individuals who were placed into the foster care system when they were under the age of 18 and lived in a foster care setting such as a group home, juvenile delinquency detention center, or foster home for at least a year. In addition to having been placed into foster care, an additional element of the criteria for the population was that they must have obtained a master's level degree or higher at the time of the interview from a university in the United States. The age of the population recruited to participate in this study was between 25-40. This age group was selected as the researcher was searching for an age range that would be representative of graduate students. Additionally, this age group was selected to ensure that the individuals who were willing to participate in the study were not excluded due to their age, and also to better understand varying experiences depending on the resources that may or may have not been available as the participants were going through college.

Sampling procedures. The researcher used a purposive sampling as the primary form of data collection. Purposive sampling allowed the researcher to collect data specifically from those individuals who spent time in the foster care system and who also obtained a graduate level degree from a University in the United States. Within the domain of purposive sampling, the researcher utilized criterion sampling. Lunenburg and Irby (2008) describe criterion sampling as “selecting participants who meet some criterion” (p. 176). As the researcher was specifically

focused on the combined experience of being placed into foster care and also obtaining a graduate level degree, selecting participants who met this criteria was a prudent approach. The researcher solicited agencies or committees that serve former foster youth, including Casa Pacifica, a former shelter home and residential treatment facility that previously served children ages 0-21. Additionally, the researcher used social media outlets as a way of recruiting, targeting specific groups where former foster youth gather, including California Youth Connection Facebook, and the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute Facebook in an effort to connect with former foster youth who have obtained graduate level degrees.

Human Subject Considerations

In an effort to protect the human subjects who participated in the study, the researcher followed Pepperdine University's Graduate Professional School (GPS) IRB policies, including but not limited to contacting subjects and collecting data until receiving GPS IRB approval. The researcher completed the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) investigator education training.

The researcher created a recruitment flyer that was published through various social media outlets, targeting online groups where former foster youth may participate. The researcher obtained any permissions, if necessary, to do so. The researcher then emailed potential participants with an overview of the purpose of the study, benefits, and potential risks. Additionally, the researcher informed the participants how the data would be utilized, and requested that the interviews be audio recorded. The researcher contacted those individuals who expressed interest and provided them with an electronic copy of the consent form along with the interview guide prior to the date of the interview.

The study was voluntary, and participants had the right to opt out at any time with no repercussions whatsoever. Participant identity was protected. All data collected was reported without identifiers. In the case that data was reported in isolation for any particular subject, identifiable information such as name, age, family structure, or location of upbringing was concealed and not reported in the study. In order to ensure confidentiality, participants were not required to sign their informed consent form and the researcher constituted aliases to protect participants' identities. The data was coded, and a master list linking the study codes to subject identities was kept as a hard copy in a locked cabinet. The cabinet was kept in the private room in the home of the primary investigator separate from the data. All data was kept in a password-protected computer in the home of the primary investigator. The data was accessible only to the researcher and the dissertation committee members. All data will be kept for three years following the study and will be destroyed after. Hard copies of the data and other appropriate documents will be destroyed through shredding. The audio recordings of the data will be permanently deleted from the recording device. Electronic files will be permanently deleted from the computer. Participation in the study posed minimal risks, however some of the potential risks included discomfort in recalling of difficult experiences during their college years and years in foster care. Participants could have also experienced some level of mental exhaustion or loss of time for the length of the interview session. In an effort to ameliorate the risks identified, the researcher allowed breaks during the interview process as necessary. The researcher also reiterated before the interview that participation in the study is voluntary and that participants may refuse to answer any questions and or stop the interview at any moment should they become uncomfortable.

In an effort to ensure the identifiable and confidential information of subjects was protected, the researcher committed to the following:

1. Participants were not required to sign their informed consent form, and the researcher constituted aliases to protect participants' identities.
2. A master list of participant identities has been kept separate from data and has been kept secured in a locked file cabinet.
3. All research documents have been secured on a password-protected computer and in a locked file cabinet.
4. All data has remained confidential with access limited to the researcher and dissertation committee members.
5. Study data and other appropriate documents will be destroyed, shredded, and deleted 3 years after the study is completed.

It is very likely that the benefits of the study will exceed the minimal risks. Some of the potential benefits include a new contribution to the field concerning the experiences of individuals who obtained postgraduate degrees and emancipated from the foster care system, of which currently very limited information exists. Additional potential benefits include a better understanding of what contributes to the academic success of at risk populations and knowledge about how educators can lead at risk students to academic success. Lastly, a deeper understanding of the relationship between identity development, self-efficacy and resilience in former foster youth.

Instrumentation

The researcher conducted one-on-one semi-structured interviews with individuals who met the criteria to participate in the study. The interviews were conducted face-to-face, through a virtual platform such Skype or via telephone call. Interview questions were designed based on

the information gathered from an in-depth literature review and the research question guiding this study: What do former foster youth who have completed graduate level programs report as elements that have contributed to their academic success?

A total of 22 interview questions were utilized (see Appendix A and B). The first seven questions were used to obtain an understanding of the demographics of the participants and to ensure that these align with the criteria necessary to participate in the study. The questions included:

1. What age were you when you entered foster care?
2. At what age did you exit foster care?
3. Gender?
4. Duration in foster care?
5. How would you define your ethnicity or race?
6. Type of Foster care setting? Name all that apply.
 - a. Group home
 - b. Foster home
 - c. Treatment foster care
 - d. Living with a relative
 - e. Non family relative
 - f. Juvenile Hall
 - g. Shelter Home
 - h. Residential
 - i. Other (please explain)
7. What graduate program did you complete?

The next set of questions were asked in an effort to understand the relationship between identity development, self-efficacy, and resilience and the contribution these had, if any on individuals who spent time in the foster care system and managed to obtain graduate level degrees (see Appendix B).

The first four questions are an inquiry about the foster care and early educational experience of the participant. The following questions were asked:

1. Could you share with me about your educational experience while in foster care?
2. What were your own beliefs of your academic abilities while in foster care?
3. Did you feel stigmatized by having been in foster care? If so, how did this impact your education in K-12 and early college (undergraduate years)?
4. What were your dreams and academic goals before entering foster care? Did you believe you could achieve them? What were your dreams and academic goals after leaving foster care?

The last 11 questions were geared to better understand the graduate level experience of the participant, including elements that contributed to the success of the completion of the graduate degree and also challenges the individual may have encountered throughout the process. The following questions were asked:

1. At what point in your life did you decide to pursue a graduate level degree? And what motivated you to do so?
2. What were your expectations of yourself when you decided to apply to a graduate program?
3. Tell me about your graduate School Experience, Where did you go? What were some of the highlights?

4. Is there any experience or event you can pinpoint that led to a realization of your academic potential?
5. Please share any experiences you had with graduate faculty having low or high expectations of you. Were these faculty aware of your foster care experience?
6. Throughout your process of obtaining a graduate degree, did you have any doubt in your mind that you could complete your program? If so, how did you manage to overcome that?
7. What elements have contributed to your graduate school success?
8. What challenges did you face in completing graduate school? And what did you do to overcome these challenges
9. Who believed in your ability to complete graduate school?
10. How did obtaining a graduate degree impact you (personally and professionally)? If at all?
11. What advice would you have for a young person formerly in foster care who may be considering applying to graduate school?

Content validity. To address the content validity for the instrument, the researcher employed a literature support and expert review.

Literature support. Table 1 represents the alignment between the guiding research question and the interview question. Additionally Table 1 also displays the literature support for the interview questions.

Table 1

Relationship between Interview Questions and Literature

Interview Questions	Literature Source
What were your dreams and academic goals before entering foster care? Did you believe you could achieve them? What were your dreams and academic goals after leaving foster care?	Oakes (2011)
Did you feel stigmatized by having been in foster care? If so, how did this impact your education in k-12 & early college (undergraduate years)?	Kools (1999, 1997) & McMurray et al. (2011)
What were your expectations of yourself when you decided to apply to a graduate program?	Matthews et al. (2014)
Please share any experiences you had with graduate faculty having low or high expectations of you. Were these faculty aware of your foster care experience?	
How did obtaining a graduate degree impact you (personally and professionally)? If at all?	
What were your own beliefs of your academic abilities while in foster care	Bandura et al. (2001) Bassi et al. (2007) Bondy et al. (2017)
At what point in your life did you decide to pursue a graduate level degree? And what motivated you to do so?	
Is there any experience or event you can pinpoint that led to a realization of your academic potential?	
Throughout your process of obtaining a graduate degree, did you have any doubt in your mind that you could complete it? If so, how did you manage to overcome that?	Bandura (1980)
Who believed in you being able to complete graduate school?	Bandura (1993) Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli (2001)
Could you share with me about your educational experience while in foster care?	
Tell me about your graduate school experience, where did you go? What were some of the highlights?	
What elements have contributed to your graduate school success?	Drapeau et al. (2007) Jackson & Martin (1998) Martin & Jackson (2002)
What challenges did you face in completing graduate school? And what did you do to overcome these challenges	Hass et al. (2014) Morales (2008) Perez et al. (2009)
What advice would you have for a young person formerly in foster care who may be considering applying to graduate school?	Salazar et al. (2016)

Expert review. The researcher sought the assistance of two individuals who are considered experts in the fields of child welfare and education. The first individual started her career as a probation officer, and later became a teacher at a detention facility for juveniles. Currently, she holds a position as an administrator responsible for providing technical assistance and training in regards to serving foster youth in school districts in a Southern California county. The second expert began her career as a group home staff, and later became an administrator at a social services agency. Currently she holds a position at a Southern California community college overseeing foster and kinship care education as well as the Guardian Scholars program. Both individuals have experience as foster parents and provide training to individuals interested in becoming educational rights holders for foster youth. The individuals have a combined experience of over 50 years in serving and advocating for foster children and their education. The two experts were asked to provide specific feedback regarding the clarity of the language used to ask the question, if the questions could be answered in the proposed time, and additional suggestions they may have based on their professional experience. The feedback provided by the experts was used to revise the instrumentation tool as appropriate.

On February 11, 2019, the first expert responded with her written feedback via email on the instrumentation. She suggested adding language that would specify the K-12 academic experience and other minor changes that would bring more clarity to the questions. For example, the researcher included a question concerning the potential stigma of being in foster care. The question read, Did you have any negative foster care stigmas about yourself- and if so, how did you overcome these? The expert suggested changes so that the question could read as follows; Did you have any negative foster care stigmas about yourself- and if so, how did this impact your

education in K-12? The expert also suggested the addition of two questions including, (a) Is there any experience or event you can pinpoint that led to a realization of your academic potential? and (b) What advice would you have for a young person formerly in foster care who was considering applying to graduate school? The expert stated that the changes were minor and the questions initially established were great.

The second expert also provided written feedback via email on February 11, 2019. Much like the first expert, her suggestions were minor and mostly included changes around the language in order to bring clarity to the proposed questions. For example, the researcher included a question that read; How did you see yourself before you entered care? How did you see yourself after you left foster care? The expert stated that the question was broad and may cause some individuals to struggle with their response to the question. She suggested asking the same question in the following manner; What were your dreams and academic goals before entering foster care? Did you believe you could achieve them? What were your dreams and academic goals after leaving foster care? The second respondent also made a brief change in the order the questions should be asked. The second expert also shared that based on the questions; she didn't think the interviews would take longer than an hour. See Appendix B for final interview guide and instrument.

Data Collection Procedures

The researcher used an audio recorder in order to provide her full attention to participants as they partook in the interview. The audio recorder also allowed for effective transcription, as one can listen, pause and transcribe as many times as necessary to ensure accuracy. The researcher followed the procedures identified in the subsequent section:

- Connected with leaders of committees or agencies who serve former foster youth.

- Shared with those leaders the purpose of the research.
- Asked those leaders to assist in reaching out to or identifying participants who meet the criteria to participate in the study.
- Simultaneously, utilized social media outlets to reach out to individuals who meet the criteria and who might be interested in participating in the study.
- Obtained IRB approval.
- Reached out to those individuals who have displayed interest in participating in the study via email, which consists of an overview of the purpose of the study, benefits, and potential risks.
- Once participation had been confirmed, the researcher scheduled face-to-face or virtual interviews with those individuals who have displayed interest in participating in the study.
- Once a meeting had been confirmed, an email was sent to the participants with the consent form and participant's interview guide.
- The researcher confirmed the interview day, time, and format via email with the participants two days prior to the interview.
- The researcher used the interview guide at the time of the interview.
- The one-hour interviews were audio recorded.
- Interview transcripts were sent to participants with request to review for representativeness and to respond with any changes within a week. A non-response was interpreted as no changes requested.

Data Management

The researcher undertook a variety of efforts in order to ensure the confidentiality of the participants in the study. One of these efforts was to use pseudonyms and to number the interviews. The researcher also kept a master list containing names of the participants, separate from the data, to protect participants. All of the information; including the audio recordings, transcripts, and master list of pseudonyms have been maintained in a password protected computer. The information has been limited to the researcher and the dissertation committee members. Lastly, all of the information obtained for the purposes of the research will be destroyed after 3 years of study completion.

Data Analysis

All interviews were recorded and transcribed in order to ascertain themes. Once the interviews were transcribed, the researcher returned them to participants to provide them with an opportunity to review and ensure for accuracy, and maintain the validity of the study. Once participants approved the transcriptions, the researcher followed a simplified version of Moustakas's (1994) approach as described by Creswell (2013). The researcher developed a list of key themes and phrases relating to how the individuals experienced foster care and then obtained a graduate level degree. Creswell also suggests that the researcher take the main themes and group them into larger themes. The researcher used themes that arose from the research to answer the research question and provide information for implications and discussion.

Positionality

The researcher has worked in the fields of child welfare and education for almost 15 years. She started her career as a bilingual and special education instructional assistant, before leaving the education field to work more closely with foster and homeless children. The majority

of the researcher's work experience has been in the fields of foster care and children's mental health, with a specific focus on the educational journey of these at-risk students. The researcher worked for nearly a decade in a children's shelter home, residential facility, and non-public school. Currently the researcher works as a Family Engagement Coordinator, for a grantee agency of the Head Start program. Having spent a portion of her life in the foster care system herself, and then working closely with children who faced the same barriers, the researcher wanted to understand how some individuals are able to reach the highest levels of academia, in spite of the challenges they come across. The researcher made an effort to ensure that her personal biases did not stand in the way of her research, including frank and constant conversations with her dissertation chair.

Chapter Four: Results

This chapter presents the findings of the research study. Findings are organized in four sections, which include participants' demographics, portraits, the collective themes that were identified by the participants, and advice offered from the participants.

Study Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study is to explore the lived experiences of former foster youth who have completed graduate level academic programs in order to discover and describe the elements that these individuals believe led to their academic success. For the purposes of this study, academic success refers to the completion of a graduate level program.

Research Question

The primary research question for this study was: What do former foster youth who have completed graduate level programs report as elements that have contributed to their academic success?

Research Design

The study utilized a qualitative approach and portraiture in methodology. The researcher conducted six interviews with individuals who had spent time in foster care and now hold graduate level degrees. Two of the interviews were face to face, two of them were conducted via Skype and two of them were conducted over the phone. The interviews consisted of fifteen questions. For some of the participants, follow up questions were posed for clarification purposes. Additionally, seven demographic questions were emailed to each participant prior to the day of the interview.

A qualitative approach was selected to obtain an in-depth perspective of the lived experiences of individuals who had been placed into foster care and were able to obtain graduate level degrees. Portraiture methodology was utilized to capture the depth of the participants' experiences and to better illustrate the compelling stories of their journey from foster care to graduate school. The researcher interviewed three females and three males. Interviews were semi-structured and included open-ended questions. All of the interviews were transcribed and sent back to the participants for accuracy. The researcher asked participants to review the transcription and return them within a week if they had any changes. After receiving the transcriptions that had been reviewed, the researcher began reading each transcription. Themes began to emerge and the researcher began identifying these themes on an Excel spreadsheet. The researcher then elected to present the themes based on the number of participants who identified the theme, and the frequency at which the theme was identified. The data below is presented in two sections. First, a portraiture methodology is used to tell the story of each of the participants. The second section is a presentation of the primary thematic categories that emerged from the interviews.

Background Interview Questions

Prior to conducting the interviews, each of the participants answered a demographics questionnaire. Answers to the questionnaire provide a more holistic picture of the lived experiences of the participants. Table 2 provides the answers to each of the questions, which include the age when the participant entered the foster care system, along with the age when they exited foster care, the graduate program they have completed, and the type of foster care placement. Lastly, the questionnaire also inquired about participant ethnicity, along with their identified gender and the number of years they were in foster care placement.

Table 2

Demographic Questionnaire

Questions	Marianna	Thomas	Alicia	Carl	Olivia	Jordan
1. Age when entered foster care	15	1, adopted at 5 and re-entered at 13	12	12	15	11
2. Age when exited foster care	18	19	18	18	18	18
3. Gender	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
4. Duration in foster care	3 yrs	10 yrs	6 yrs	6 yrs	3 yrs	7 yrs
5. Ethnicity as defined by participant	Hispanic	Caucasian/ White	Caucasian/ Native American Indian	White	White	Black
6. Type of foster care setting	1. Group Homes 2. Non-Family Relative 3. Juvenile Hall	1. Group Home 2. Foster Home 3. Treatment Foster Care 4. Juvenile Hall 5. Shelter Home 6. Residential Treatment Facility	1. Group Home 2. Residential Treatment Facility	1. Foster Home	1. Foster Home	1. Group Home 2. Living with a Relative
7. Graduate program completed	Master's in social work	Master's in Social Work	Master's in Social Work/ Master's in Human Development & Psychology	JD/ Master's in Library Science	Master's in Social Work	Master's in Public Policy

The Portraits

To illustrate the story, the portraits begin by introducing the foster care and early education experience of each of the study participants. This is followed by their recollection of their experience of the foster care system itself. Afterwards, participants describe their motivation and expectation once they entered graduate school. Each portrait ends with

participants describing some of the challenges they faced in graduate school, along with explanations of how they overcame the challenges identified. Lastly, each participant shares elements that contributed to their graduate school success. To humanize the full experience of each participant and for confidentiality purposes, the researcher elected to assign pseudonyms to each participant and to the other individuals who influenced their story.

Marianna.

Foster care and early education. Marianna entered the foster care system at the age of fifteen. She had multiple placements including three group homes, lived with a relative, and she was also placed in juvenile hall. When asked about her educational experience while she was placed in foster care, Marianna shared that she had attended multiple schools and that part of the reason why she attended various schools was because she was struggling with behaviors. While in middle school, she got suspended from two of the three middle schools in her hometown. She described middle school as an experience that was very difficult. She shared that she struggled with engagement, and that there was no one at the school that could assist her with being present at school or connecting to the academic material that was being taught. Marianna also struggled with attendance while in middle school.

Marianna was placed into foster care shortly after entering high school. She was expelled from the main high school in her hometown and had to attend multiple continuation high schools, for a total of six different high schools. She described the continuation high schools she attended as holding places:

The teachers were really nice, but they had no structure for the classroom. I think I was the only female there and the rest were males and they were reading newspapers, and so they were just kind of like hanging-out or weight training outside you know and the guy next to me was nodding out on heroin. I think of a holding cell, it was a holding place because there was no structure whatsoever and it was very minimal class work, it almost

felt like it was just... if we can stay safe in that small area for a few hours, then our school work was done.

Her first recollection of actually being engaged in school while in foster care was when she was sent out of her home county, into a county in Northern California. She attributed her engagement to being away from her community and the trouble that she was getting into.

I lived in the group home and then the school for me was somewhat of a safe place because even though there was a lot of issues happening around me, I still didn't choose to be part of the gang involvement up there, or just some of the risky situations that were occurring. I was still you know doing teenage stuff and engaging in risky behaviors, but they were in a safe way like with people that were my friends. I do remember going to school and finishing the school material.

Two additional elements that contributed to Marianna's engagement in school, while she was living up north, were her involvement in a peer group and her relationship with the teacher who was leading the group. The teacher was not just teaching Marianna about academics, in Marianna's own words:

She was teaching me how to be a young woman and she did it in a very friendly and not judgmental way. That meant a lot to me actually, and I didn't even know it meant that much to me until right now.

Marianna was ultimately able to graduate from adult school and receive her high school diploma.

Experiencing the foster care system. When inquired about any negative foster care stigmas about herself, Marianna stated she did experience these, however it wasn't something she realized at the moment. In reflecting on her group home experience, Marianna described stigma as being in a van with five other girls and a staff that looked nothing like her. Marianna shared that when she returned to her county of origin the stigma diminished, as she was able to blend into her community and was cared for by staff who looked like her and spoke the same language as her. An additional element that assisted her in overcoming stigma was being able to obtain employment and work towards getting her high school diploma. A turning point for

Marianna came from her fear of turning 18 and having to figure life out for herself. Marianna believed that if she did not make some changes in her life, she would have ended up in prison, dead, or on drugs. If she was able to make changes, which included her graduating from high school, and sustaining employment, then perhaps her life would be different. At these realizations, Marianna began to make different choices and also began advocating for herself. She shared:

By me getting the support I needed to get healthier individually, healthier in general... my mental health all that. I was able to then integrate and then feel less stigmatized by my situation or the fact that I lived with different girls and staff 24/7.

Marianna shared that prior to foster care she felt like she was a part of something, she felt like she belonged to her family unit. Regardless of what was happening in her home, she was still able to identify with the members in her household. She had a role to play in her family unit as a big sister or a daughter. It wasn't a healthy environment, but she still felt, as she described, "a part of somebody's life, a part of somebody's unit." In regard to her academics prior to entering care, Marianna shared that she did not have academic goals. At one point she wanted to be singer or an actress, but she did not believe in her academic capacity. Marianna recalls a conversation she had with counselor while she was placed in juvenile hall; she told her counselor that her goal was to go to prison and earn a "sureña" tattoo, a tattoo that is typically earned in prison by respected members of southern California gangs.

Marianna shared that being placed into foster care was helpful because she was able to become independent but still had support. She was safe from the drama and trauma that had surrounded her home. She felt safe in care, but she also felt isolated and lonely and she missed a lot of things. Thanks to the support she received while in care she was able to get into a housing program and sustain employment, which allowed her to believe she was capable. Her academic

goal once she left foster care was to become an immigration attorney to help provide individuals with an opportunity to succeed in this country.

Graduate school motivations and expectations. When questioned about her decision to pursue a graduate level degree and her motivations, Marianna shared that graduate school was not something that she had in mind for herself. However, she had a friend who believed in her, even when Marianna herself did not believe that graduate school could be a reality for her. Marianna described her experience in undergrad as very busy. She shared, “Basically, I had no time with my kids and worked myself to death, so to me going back to graduate school it was like No, you’re playing, I can’t do that!”

Marianna shared that the most impactful element was not only that her friend believed in her, but she held her hand through the application process: “It wasn’t just, ‘Here, I believe in you, do it’ it was like ‘Here, I believe in you and I’ll be right next to you while you are doing it.’” Marianna shared that once she entered graduate school she had high expectations of herself. She saw graduate school as an opportunity to prove to herself that she was capable and intelligent. She also wanted to prove to herself that although she did not have a “general upbringing” she could still do well.

Marianna obtained a master’s degree in Social work from a California State University. She described her master’s program as “raw” and personal as it highlighted many of the issues that had impacted her life growing up. She also shared that it was a very positive experience, and part of the reason for this was because of the cohort that she was in. She shared that the cohort was very supportive and accepting:

There was a lot of belonging there, I felt like I belonged there, a lot of the people there were just as passionate as I was about the studies and the material that we were covering. Everybody had you know... their A game on.

Marianna stated that the sense of belonging was important and helpful as she was going through her master's program.

Challenges in graduate school. Marianna described an experience that led to the realization of her academic potential as an instance in which she almost did not make it through her program due to her heavy focus on her job. As part of her master's program Marianna had to complete an internship. Her internship supervisor pulled her aside one day and had a frank conversation with her about her commitment to the master's program and what that would entail. Marianna shared:

She felt like I was just not taking care of myself and I wasn't prioritizing the commitment or just owning up to the commitment that I had made to be in the program. What she expected from me was to leave work at work, and to be 100% at the internship.

Marianna shared that although the internship supervisor was strict, she also challenged Marianna, and the structure she put in place was essential for Marianna not only being successful in her internship, but also learning a work life balance.

In addition to the challenges she faced in her internship, Marianna also struggled with a professor who had high expectations of her. Dr. X was Marianna's research methods professor, and the primary professor guiding students through the IRB process. Marianna shared the difficulties in her interactions with Dr. X and stated that Dr. X was not very approachable and was inpatient. She would refer Marianna to the resources available on campus but due to Marianna's full-time work schedule and raising her children as a single mother, she didn't have the ability to go and access the resources on the main campus. Marianna took the lack of support from her professor as a challenge, and she reached out to other individuals who were willing to support her through the process of obtaining IRB approval. She reached out to other professors who had knowledge in the subject and also experts who had experience in analyzing data.

Marianna stated that one of her greatest challenges in obtaining IRB approval was the writing. She stated that she had gaps in certain areas of her academics due to her foster care experience, writing was one of them.

In spite of the difficulties Marianna encountered in graduate school, she did not share her foster care experience in her program because she wanted to have a normal experience. She said, “I didn’t want to get like special treatment.” Marianna also shared that although graduate school was difficult, not completing it was not an option. Her time was limited as a graduate student, full time employee, and a single mom. She knew she was being spread thin, but her love of learning kept her going.

I really enjoyed learning, like I liked being in the learners’ seat because I don’t think I was there much of my life. I felt like, “Here’s my chance to demonstrate to myself that this is important.” This is something that was missing from my life that was... and not in a sense taken, but definitely not fostered. It wasn’t something that someone, or the system prioritized for me.

Elements that contributed to graduate school success. Marianna shared that the support of her employer was important to her completing graduate school. She said, “Being able to have the flexibility to you know work part time or work less because I have my internship going on or just the flexibility I think made a huge difference.” In addition to her employer’s flexibility, Marianna also stated that having consistent and safe childcare contributed to her completing her master’s program. “When I was gone at night for school, I knew they were safe [her children] and they were good, and I didn’t have worries about them.”

When questioned about the personal and professional impact of obtaining a graduate degree, Marianna shared that personally it has helped her grow a lot as an individual. She also shared the pride she felt when she walked down the stage, particularly to be able to share that moment with her children.

I don't think my kids knew how much it meant to me to give them that example, because I just want them to have a better life. So personally, to me it meant that my kids wouldn't have to go through anything that I've been through and that they know that I would fight for them.

As for professional impact, Marianna felt that with her graduate level degree her voice had become stronger, and she felt a greater level of respect from others in the workforce. She also shared that she was just now beginning to see the power behind the degree.

Thomas.

Foster care and early education. Thomas first entered foster care at the age of one. When he was five, he was adopted by a family who cared for him. Unfortunately, due to many challenges, Thomas was placed back into care at the age of 13. He attended four different middle schools and three different high schools, because of the lack of stability in his life. The types of placements he resided in included shelter homes, group homes, and foster homes. Thomas's final group home allowed him the flexibility to take university courses while he was still in high school. Thomas shared that he would attend high school from 8:00am to 3:30pm and in the evenings, he would go to the university. This allowed Thomas to graduate from high school his junior year and begin college as a second semester sophomore.

When Thomas turned 19 he got the opportunity to participate in a summer internship in Washington, D.C. This was a wonderful opportunity but unfortunately, this forced Thomas to make the difficult decision between continuing to receive extended foster care benefits, or participate in the unique internship opportunity. Thomas chose the latter and exited foster care at the age of 19. Thomas also graduated with his bachelor's degree in philosophy at the age of 19 and was accepted into law school on the East Coast. After participating in an internship in Washington, D.C, Thomas transitioned into law school.

That was a pretty hard transition at that period of time of my life because right before moving to the east coast I was living in a group home with 25 other people, so I was constantly around individuals, and staff members. And I was very supported, but when I left the group home environment after I graduated and went to law school, this was my first time ever having a place of my own and it was a shock. I don't know if it was so much a culture shock, but just going from one extreme to the other extreme, going from living with 25 people to not living with nobody, like I was extremely depressed.

Thomas shared that many of the people around him saw him as such a success that they automatically assumed he was doing well and therefore did not check up on him or reach out. The reality was that Thomas entered into a very depressive state that ultimately led him to drop out of law school. He decided to pursue a master's degree instead and applied to a graduate program on the West Coast. While the graduate school was in the process of determining whether Thomas would be accepted or not, he was in limbo. If he did not get accepted into the master's program on the West Coast, he would have to go back to his home state and attempt to re-enter extended foster care. Fortunately for Thomas, he was accepted into the master's program in California and also joined an advocacy group for foster youth.

When inquired about his academic abilities while in foster care, Thomas shared that he did not consider himself to be a genius or even gifted. He did state however, that he was disciplined. He described that he never struggled with believing that he was smart. He considered himself to be smart enough to get the university work done. For him, it was more of a matter of can he actually get the work done. Thomas viewed education as a way to secure a stabilized future. He described his education as a safe haven.

Experiencing the foster care system. When inquired about any foster care stigmas, Thomas shared that going through foster care was very isolating due to him not being able to share his experience with others because they could not relate. Thomas shared an experience when he was a resident advisor at the dorms. Other resident advisors would make plans for the

summer and invite him to do activities that were typical of college-aged students such as going on a road trip or going backpacking. However, Thomas wasn't able to participate in such activities because the university housing closed for the summer and this meant Thomas had to go back to his group home. Thomas explained:

They didn't understand that, they would say things like, "Oh why can't you come road trip with us?" and I'm like no, in order for me to be eligible to receive foster care services I have to go back to the group home during my breaks. I didn't have the same opportunities as other people.

Thomas further stated that at one point he felt like he was being very open about his story and he realized that this made others feel uncomfortable. These types of responses led Thomas to stop sharing his story with others who were not familiar with the foster care experience.

However, in reflecting on this, Thomas decided that although the uncomfortable response of those who were not familiar with the foster care system was a negative part of the equation, sharing his story to inspire others was even more powerful than the negative. Thomas shared, "I had to get over that stigma in my head that foster youth are too damaged or just not up to par as other people in society who have a traditional upbringing."

Thomas also spoke about feelings of stigma transferring into adulthood. He shared that immediately before entering foster care, he feared speaking out about his situation because he might get hurt or get beaten or seen as a compulsive liar. In Thomas's own words:

That's how the fear transferred into that from being a child and thinking I was going to get beaten, to an adult and thinking, how are people going to react to me disclosing this information and will I be just as professional in their eyes or will that be just as normalized.

Graduate school motivations and expectations. Thomas shared that prior to entering care his academic goals were to become an archeologist and travel the world to understand the world's ancient past. He felt confident in his capacity to achieve the goal; however he shared that

at the age of 11, he wouldn't know how to pursue that dream. After going through foster care, Thomas's academic goals consisted of being able to impact the lives of foster children in any capacity.

When asked about his decisions and motivations to pursue a graduate level degree, Thomas shared that he first decided to pursue a graduate degree at the age of 17 when he decided to apply to law school. His motivation to do so came from his social worker who encouraged him to apply. She would also tell him he would be a good attorney. Thomas stated that at that time, he did not really know what law school would entail or what things would look like once he did receive his law degree. He never interned at a law firm or participated in a clerkship. The only area of law that he was familiar with was advocacy. The uncertainty of what life would be once he got his law degree, was part of the reason why he did not have much ambition to obtain the law degree.

Thomas shared that his decision to pursue a master's degree in social work really came out of survival. When he dropped out of law school his two options were to either return to his state of origin and attempt to re-enter foster care, or to get into a graduate program in order to qualify for the financial aid. He elected to pursue a master's degree in social work, not because this was his lifelong passion, but because it was a practical option. Thomas shared that he did not have the guidance or mentors who could assist him in exploring other fields such as the medical field or getting into research. He stated:

I didn't have anyone on the caliber that has already done something I would like to pursue. I didn't have those connections with a professor, or someone who had their PhD, or someone who's doing research, or someone who's doing medicine.

Thomas has now been working as social worker for the last 3 years and feels more stable and secure in his life. Because his basic needs are being met, he feels like he can think clearly.

Thomas shared, “Now that my life is stable I’m able to think clearly and not have to worry about where am I going sleep at night or how am I going to get food, or is my financial aid going to run out.” Thomas has recently been accepted into a graduate program in psychology and is scheduled to begin summer 2019.

When asked about his expectation of himself when he entered the graduate program, Thomas shared that his expectations of himself were minimal because he entered his graduate program to be able to survive. He did not believe that he would have a life long career in the field of social work. He stated, “I didn’t have my basic needs met so I couldn’t think about you know self-actualization.” Thomas obtained his master’s degree in Social Work from a private school in southern California. His biggest highlight of his graduate program was the amount of support he received when he disclosed to his professor that he was homeless.

Challenges in graduate school. The greatest challenge Thomas encountered while in graduate school was facing homelessness. Given the circumstances Thomas was facing of needing to get into a graduate program, he applied to an online program so that he could make his transition from law school to the master’s program in the summer, with the intention of transitioning to the program on the main campus the following fall. Unfortunately, his financial aid for the summer session overlapped with the fall semester by a brief period. This meant that Thomas would not be eligible for financial aid for the fall. Thomas’s master’s program required him to participate in an internship in addition to attending classes; therefore he wasn’t able to secure full time employment. Thomas was dependent on his financial aid to be able to pay for housing and other basic needs and when the financial aid fell through, he had to decide between giving up his vehicle or his housing. Thomas chose to keep his car. He lived in one of the parking structures at his school for the first few months of graduate school.

For first couple months, I would go to the gym, take a shower, and then go to my classes and stay in my car. It wasn't until around November when one of the professors was just telling me how they saw how I wasn't participating as much in the coursework and they just felt like something was off.

Thomas shared that during this time when he had no financial aid different thoughts crossed his mind. At one point, he thought he would have to quit school and get a job in retail or Starbucks. He had exhausted the services at the financial aid office. He shared that he would speak to someone in that office daily. Thomas shared, "I told the professor, 'This is what I'm just going through.' I was just done." Up until this moment when his professor pulled him aside, Thomas had not shared with anyone in his program about his foster care experience. Thomas finally shared with his professor the barriers he was facing. His professor mobilized her colleagues and this resulted in Thomas's tuition for the fall semester being waived; they were also able to secure graduate housing for him.

Thomas graduated with his master's degree in social work by the age of 21, and although he applied to various jobs before graduating, he did not receive any offers. He also attempted to get into a housing program for youth who were formerly in foster care, but because he wasn't originally from California he hit some roadblocks. Thomas shared, "So I've graduated with my master's degree at 21 and I'm living in a homeless shelter, a youth homeless shelter." While living at the shelter Thomas got the opportunity to work for an individual who was running for elected office. He would go to work on the campaign, and at night would return to the shelter to sleep. Fortunately for Thomas once the campaign was over, he received an offer to work at a child welfare office, and he was able to transition from the shelter to his own place.

Elements that contributed to graduate school success. Thomas stated that one of the most crucial elements for him to be able to complete graduate school was grit and his ability to persevere in spite the circumstances he faced.

In addition, having his professor and other members of the faculty supporting him was paramount for him to be able to succeed. The individuals who believed in Thomas completing a graduate level degree were his social worker and his friends. Thomas highlighted some feelings about individuals who would continuously encourage him, not understanding the full capacity of what he was trying to do by pursuing graduate school. Nonetheless, he was grateful for their support.

When inquired about the impact of obtaining a graduate degree both personally and professionally, Thomas shared that personally it gave him the ability to survive. He shared that thanks to obtaining a master's degree in social work, he is able to have the job that he currently has. He also shared that financially he has more stability. In the professional realm, Thomas shared that he is able to apply for higher level positions that he would not be eligible for, had he not obtained his master's degree.

Alicia.

Foster care and early education. Alicia was first placed into foster care at the age of 12. Unlike other individuals who participated in this study, Alicia came to the foster care system through the department of mental health. She had to advocate for herself extensively in order for the systems to understand that the reason for her abnormal behaviors was because of the abuse she had experienced at the hands of those who were supposed to protect her. Alicia had one foster care placement at the age of 12 and was later placed in a group home that was attached to a non-public school. The non-public school was small, about 40 students, all of whom struggled with emotional challenges. Alicia was able to complete grades 6-12 at the nonpublic school. Alicia credits the non-public school for allowing her the opportunity to focus on her therapy, even though educational rigor was lacking. Alicia shared:

It was a packet of work on a Monday. You connected the dots to a square and you turned in your work and you were done for the week... The continuation school was really good about providing us with emotional stability. I think that was a saving grace for me.

Alicia shared that during her tenure at the non-public school she was a straight A honors student, largely because she would submit her completed packet on the same day she would receive it. She shared that she did not feel dumb, but she also did not feel bright. Alicia knew that she did not belong in that placement however, there was no other place for her to go. She stated, "I think they kept me there because I was getting the therapeutic support I needed, but they knew educationally they weren't challenging me at all."

Experiencing the foster care system. Prior to entering the foster care system, Alicia was lifeless. She was so heavily medicated; she described herself as a walking zombie. Her relationship with her mother was so painful that it led Alicia to attempt suicide multiple times. She shared, "I was trying to kill myself all of the time. I knew I'd succeed eventually or I'd run away and be a... I would be on the streets." Foster care was not necessarily easy, but it was better than the reality of her ever day life. She said, "Foster care is scary, and I had some scary run-ins with some girls who I lived with." What allowed Alicia to have a positive foster care experience was the fact that she was receptive to her staff and to the therapy that she was receiving.

One of the best things that could have happened to Alicia while she was placed in care was to meet her mentor, Dr. Johnson, who was the principal at the non-public school. Early on in their relationship, Dr. Johnson shared with Alicia that less than 1% of students who go through the foster care system are able to graduate from college. Dr. Johnson knew that Alicia looked up to him and that she wanted to be just like him, and he challenged her. At the same time, he also took her under his wing. They did a lot of research together and he would often share with her

that graduating from college was not going to be easy, but she had what it took to be part of the 1%. Alicia shared:

From a very early age I walked around saying, “I’m that 1%.” And I think that turned the negative stigma into a positive. He gave me a challenge, he’s like, “Everybody’s going to tell you, you can’t do it,” and he’s like, “Prove them wrong.”

Alicia was able to turn around a negative stigma into something positive, though the impact of foster care on her education was salient as she navigated community college. By the time Alicia exited foster care at the age of eighteen she felt ready to pursue her dreams, but she knew it would not be a walk in the park. Alicia shared, “I did know of the stigma, and trust me, I felt it, in community college.” Unfortunately, Dr. Johnson passed away while Alicia was still in community college.

Alicia did not have a good academic foundation to be able to succeed in her college classes. She failed her college algebra class 10 times before she was able pass. She also had significant challenges with her English courses. In addition to the academic struggles, Alicia had other life challenges that she had to overcome.

People go to college and they come home because the first semester is hard, but at least they have that support. I was 18, on my own, having to pay bills, having to work jobs, having to pay for these courses, and having to figure it out. But I knew in the back of my brain, only 1% pass that. That’s nobody, right? So, I had to... I just had to keep trying. It was all I could do.

Prior to entering foster care Alicia had no academic goals. She battled depression intensely. After leaving foster care, her academic goals consisted of changing the lives of as many children as she could reach.

Graduate school motivations and expectations. When inquired about her motivations to pursue graduate school, Alicia stated that one of her professors in undergrad encouraged her to apply to an Ivy League school. Alicia’s GRE score was not very high and therefore she did not

believe she could get into an Ivy League school, especially for a graduate program. Nonetheless, she applied and was soon accepted into an Ivy League school on the East Coast. Alicia shared that once she got into graduate school, her expectations of herself were to connect with a mentor at her new school, follow their guidance, work really hard and not lose focus. Although Alicia had high expectations of herself, she also knew her journey at the Ivy League school would be very challenging, due to the gaps in her writing. She shared, “Graduate school [was] really, really, hard. They’re like brainiacs who teach there. They did not give me any slack on my writing. I worked incredibly hard on my first papers and I got Cs.”

In addition to obtaining a master’s degree in human development from an Ivy League university, Alicia returned to the West Coast and obtained a second master’s degree in social work from a private university in Southern California. Alicia described her experience at the Ivy League graduate school as very challenging due to the academic rigor. She also shared her highlights, which included the opportunity to take a law class at the very prestigious law school, and simply being able to walk through the campus. An additional highlight for Alicia, which also led to the realization of her academic potential, was the opportunity to work on a yearlong project where she would revamp or create a program to address an issue in the world. Alicia chose to revamp the Los Angeles county foster care system and she got an A on that paper. Alicia wrapped up her time at the Ivy League school by obtaining A’s in all her classes.

Challenges in graduate school. Alicia shared that she was very outspoken about her foster care experience. All of her papers in graduate school were about foster care. She shared an experience about taking a class at the law school. She stated that after taking the class she almost wanted to become a lawyer. Alicia met with the professor who was teaching the class and they bonded. Alicia even attended a dinner at the professor’s house and shared her story with court

judges who were also in attendance. Through her relationship with this law professor, Alicia was able to participate in different events to benefit the foster care system on the East Coast.

However, when she spoke to her professor about the possibility of applying to law school, her professor responded by telling her that she would not succeed in law school and discouraged her from applying. Alicia also shared that other professors who knew of her foster care experience were more supportive and would allow her to redo papers if necessary with the help of library tutors. In fact, writing was one of the greatest challenges Alicia faced in graduate school. She shared, “It’s always been a struggle and even professionally, has always been a struggle... I know I didn’t have that foundation. I was not prepared for that.” She was ultimately able to overcome this challenge by reaching out to tutors and using extra support in that area.

Alicia shared that although being in the graduate program at the Ivy League school was very challenging in terms of academics; her experience in her second graduate program was even more challenging due to external factors. By the time Alicia had started her second graduate program, she was in a committed relationship and she had to drive about 80 miles each day in the Los Angeles traffic to attend school and participate in her internship. Her final year was even more challenging as she was planning her wedding. Her days would begin at 6am on the road and she would typically return home by 8pm. Alicia shared, “It was a nightmare, and I would come home just grouchy and snappy at my significant other... I was tired. I literally had been in higher education since I was 18 and I was 32. I was tired.” In spite of the challenges, Alicia managed to complete her last semester of her master’s degree in social work program with straight As.

Elements that contributed to graduate school success. Among the elements that contributed to Alicia succeeding in graduate school was the support of her mentor’s parents.

They not only believed in Alicia's ability, they also paid for her second master's degree. When speaking about them, Alicia shared, "I think they are my driving force, to know that everything I do they are just so dang proud. It doesn't matter, when life is hard, I call them. When life is great, I call them." Alicia considers herself very fortunate in that everyone around her has believed in her ability to complete graduate school. She shared, "I think everybody around me, my family, my mentor's family, my group home, my old school, they have all been just cheering me on." Alicia shared that even if there were some people who did not believe in her potential or who would say she would not make it, she would take those comments as a challenge and these would fuel her fire to prove them wrong.

When Alicia spoke about the impact of obtaining a graduate degree, she mentioned that it allowed her to understand her potential. Through this process of obtaining a graduate degree she realized that she can do anything she puts her mind into. Professionally, her degree is allowing her to go into private practice and serve children on a sliding scale. Alicia also highlighted the importance of networking and building relationships as paramount for her academic success. She also highlighted the importance of repairing relationships when need be. She shared:

I think so many times kids in foster care, because we mess up, we feel like we can't repair it, because nobody taught us that repairing is a process that you can do, that you can be successful at... learning that I could change how things happen. I can't change how they ended, but I can change what I do after.

Carl.

Foster care and early education. Carl had a unique experience in that he was placed into foster care with a family who had many resources. This gave him the opportunity to attend school consistently between the ages of 12 through 18. During his high school years, Carl was able to attend a prestigious and private high school, thanks to the patronage of his foster family. He shared it was an interesting time trying to navigate the private school while being in care at

the same time. He recalled, “So I was having that, on top of being in foster care, so it was a very interesting, at least for identity it was a very interesting time.” Unfortunately, Carl had missed many classes and this created a sense of inferiority in him.

Carl was placed into a situation where he was attending school with individuals whose families were very well off and had resources that allowed them to ensure the academic success of their children. However, Carl did not come into their world with the same foundations as his high school fellows. Carl shared that prior to entering foster care he felt like he was smart, however when he entered care and was placed in the private school he struggled with continuing to believe that. He shared, “Initially I thought I was very smart, and then as I said, I ended up in this private high school where I was pretty much at the bottom, struggling.” Carl shared that he was in tutorial programs most of his freshmen year and even his test scores were not very high.

Experiencing the foster care system. Carl stated that prior to entering the foster care system his primary focus was on surviving. He grew up in an unstable household and was surrounded by chaos. Once he entered care, he was trying to do what he needed to do to ensure he would not get kicked out of his foster home. Carl shared that his academic goals prior to entering care were to do enough work so that he would not be noticed for being a poor or an outstanding student. Unfortunately, he stood out as being a problematic student or one who could achieve a lot. Carl did not have academic goals for himself other than graduating from high school and entering an undergraduate program. He later found a note that he had written to himself in which he identified his desire to become a lawyer.

Graduate school motivations and expectations. Carl’s motivation for applying to a graduate program came after he received his undergraduate degree. He was trying to figure out what his next steps would be, so he took a couple of college classes, and he found one on library

technician particularly interesting. He later realized there was a profession called law librarianship and that is how he elected to pursue both a Juris Doctor and a master's in library science. Carl shared that he did not have many expectations for himself. He did not do very well on the law school admissions test (LSAT); however, he was still accepted into a law school in Northern California.

Challenges in graduate school. Carl described his tenure in law school as a very stressful and intense time. He was grateful for the opportunity to attend school part-time as it would have been a lot more challenging had he not done this. Carl enjoyed his time in the library science program a lot more. It was still stressful, but enjoyable nonetheless. Carl struggled with writing and there were times where he felt he would not make it through the graduate programs because of writing assignments. However, even in moments when he felt like quitting or when he felt he wasn't going to make it he still persevered. He stated, "I said I would do this and I'm going to do it." Carl did not speak about his foster care experience with any of his professors in graduate school. As he recalled, "Being a foster never really came up in either of those situations."

Elements that contributed to graduate school success. Carl shared that the elements that contributed to his graduate school success included the financial resources from his foster family that allowed him to obtain tutoring and covered his tuition so that he would not have to worry about student loans. Additionally, Carl credited his self-drive and lastly, he credited accommodations that were made so that he could be successful in school, thanks to some testing that was paid for by his foster family. When asked who about who believed in his ability to obtain a graduate level degree, Carl shared that his foster family believed in him, as they supported his academic endeavors financially. He also shared that he believed in himself, even if he had some doubt. Carl is still in the process of understanding the impact that his graduate

programs had on him. Professionally he is facing some challenges due to changes in his field. Carl believes that the fact that he actually completed both programs is an impact in and of itself on a personal level.

Olivia.

Foster care and early education. Olivia entered the foster care system at the age of fifteen after being removed from her family. Fortunately for her, she was able to remain in her school of origin by taking the bus every day. This gave her some stability in her academics and she was able to transfer to high school and have a stable high school experience. Olivia has a learning disability, which made learning difficult, nonetheless she always aspired to attend college, and she had dreams of becoming a marine biologist. School was difficult for Olivia, but it was still her coping mechanism. She shared, “School was everything, but I often struggled with feeling inadequate, or less than, or very stupid because learning was so challenging.” Olivia shared that given all the chaos in her life, education was the one thing she could control.

Experiencing the foster care system. Olivia shared that she grew up as “another,” meaning she was the only Caucasian individual in her community, this cause her to have feelings of being an outsider. Olivia faced so much violence in her home; she doubted she would be able to live past the age of 16. She stated, “Before foster care I was in a very um... dark place, I viewed myself, like I said I didn’t really think I was going to live much longer.” Olivia also shared that she had many negative stigmas about herself, including some that came about because of her foster care experience. She shared, “I think that people around me viewed me as sometimes a juvenile delinquent because that’s sometimes the stereotype of foster youth.” But Olivia would often surprise these individuals as she was a very good student and also held a 30 hour a week job while she was in high school. Olivia was so independent that she managed to get

an apartment at the age of eighteen while she was still in high school. During this time, there was no financial assistance for individuals who were exiting the foster care system. Olivia shared:

I think in general I knew that there was a lot of stereotypes and I was very determined to not be a statistic. I was like ‘I’m not going to be a teen mom’ and I did everything that I could, to control not being all of the things that people expected me to be.

During her last years in foster care, Olivia met a woman who became her mentor. In Olivia’s own words, her mentor began to expose her to things that were new to Olivia, “Like women with education, with higher education degrees and you know, holidays that didn’t have violence and police being called.” This exposure allowed Olivia to see that there was a different way to approach life, different from what she knew. This experience gave Olivia the determination to make new choices and it empowered her. After care, Olivia was accepted into a University of California to pursue her dream of becoming a marine biologist. However, Olivia felt so alone at the University that she decided to drop out.

Graduate school motivations and expectations. Olivia’s motivation to pursue a graduate program occurred after choosing to leave an employer for whom she really liked working. In conversations with others, Olivia found that during the 2008 economic crisis, some people opted to return to graduate school as a way to sustain themselves financially through student loans, so the jobs that she was once able to obtain with a bachelor’s degree, were now requiring a master’s. Olivia also stated that a master’s degree would give her a competitive edge if she wanted to change directions in her career. Olivia began applying to master’s programs with a focus on public health, primarily because of the negative emotions she had around the term “social worker.” However, due to a low GRE score, Olivia was not able to get into the public health program. She explored other programs including law degrees, and graduate programs in public policy. She ultimately chose to pursue a master’s degree in social work.

I felt like it was broad enough that I could go in multiple directions, but I also really appreciate that social work examined not only like the psychology of individuals...how poverty and racism all play into the way a person is genetically wired.

It is important to highlight that Olivia's learning disability had significant negative repercussions in her ability to excel in standardized exams, which ultimately impacted her ability to apply to and become accepted into certain graduate programs.

Olivia's expectations of herself when she began her graduate program were to get straight A's and to read everything her professors assigned to her. Olivia had worked full time during her undergraduate program, which caused her to finish her degree in 8 years. She was determined to do things differently for her master's program.

I really wanted an opportunity to be a student, which I had never really had when you are working full time and going to school full time, you sort of have one foot in each door, and you need to do what you need to do to get through the classes, but I really wanted an opportunity to just learn and grow and embrace that process.

Olivia figured out ways to ensure she was able to be a full-time graduate student, including applying to multiple scholarships, and taking out student loans.

Olivia obtained her master's degree from a University of California school in social work, the biggest highlight of her program was being able to grow personally. Olivia shared that the information that is covered in social work programs can be very triggering regardless of the foster care experience, and because she did not have to go to a job, she was able to process and heal in her graduate school journey. Olivia never saw herself with academic potential. She shared, "I didn't actually think I was ever going to graduate maybe even have the belief that I was smart enough to graduate." Still, her determination to prove her mother wrong encouraged her to continue trying. In addition to the motivations and expectations of her graduate school journey, Olivia also shared some of the challenges she encountered while in graduate school.

Challenges in graduate school. Olivia shared different experiences in her graduate program involving her professors. She had wonderful professors who facilitated her growth, while others seemed more concerned with obtaining tenure. There was one instance in her internship experience when Olivia highlighted areas within the system that were frustrating to her. When she shared these frustrations, someone in her program told her “As a former foster youth maybe you are too close to this issue and maybe you shouldn’t be a social worker” rather than exploring how to use that experience to the benefit of the families she would serve. This was very frustrating for Olivia, after all, she believed that part of the reason why people go into social work is because they are able to connect to the work. Olivia further shared:

I definitely felt there was some biases with individuals there and not just foster youth, but also individuals that walked in with their own trauma history, were often shut out and saying you shouldn’t work in this field that you connect to.

When asked if she had any doubts that she would complete graduate school, Olivia jokingly shared that those feelings probably happen every day while in graduate school. One challenging area she highlighted was feeling unprepared to begin her internship and begin seeing clients. Olivia felt she could have benefited from more support in that area. However, what was most helpful during those challenging times in graduate school was her support system.

What got me through it is that I have an amazing, phenomenal, chosen support network of people that I can call that will come and pick me up off of the fetal position you know and put me back on my feet and say go forth and you can do this.

Olivia highlighted that this is essential particularly for former foster youth success, having non-judgmental cheerleaders who are able to believe in them, when they don’t have the ability to believe in themselves.

An additional challenge Olivia spoke about was having to figure out how to balance her internship and her workload. Because of her learning disability, learning takes longer for her and

there were times when she would need to take internship work home because she was not able to complete it at work. This would cause her to fall behind in her schoolwork, however she was able to reach out to her professors and ask for extensions or extended time on her test. She also worked closely with the disabled student program at her school. Olivia also highlighted that she relied heavily on her fellow cohort members. She stated, “I overcame things by seeking out support and seeking out resources and just sort of staying up until 3 o’clock in the morning and just getting things done.” In spite of the challenges, Olivia was able to complete her graduate school journey, and she shared some of the elements that contributed to her success.

Elements that contributed to graduate school success. Olivia shared a few crucial elements to her success in graduate school. These included her support system, whom she calls her cheerleaders. Also, being able to access scholarships, and because she worked full time during her undergrad, she did not have any student loans, so she didn’t hesitate to take out \$67,000 in student loans to pay for her program. Olivia also identified her determination as an element that contributed to her success in graduate school:

The fact that I can get beat up, and fall off the horse, and I’m just like, “Well, let’s get back on this and try again.” I’m very determined to reach the goal that I set, but I also think that without my communities support I would not have made it through.

Olivia highlighted that by the time she got into graduate school she had established a very strong and supportive group of chosen family, all of whom had not doubt she would succeed in graduate school. Olivia herself was a little surprised, but everyone around her believed in her.

Olivia shared that some of the personal impact of obtaining a graduate degree included economic stability and feelings of safety:

My salary doubled after graduate school, and my retirement, and that goes into feeling more secure and safe in the world because now I can pay my bills and I can invest in retirement and I have health insurance.

Another personal impact of obtaining a graduate degree was the amount of personal growth that took place for Olivia. Through her program, she was able to learn and grow tremendously and she feels much more comfortable in the world. In addition to the economic stability, and the personal growth, her graduate degree also provided her with a sense of self-confidence and security in the professional realm; where if she was dismissed from her job or had to quit for one reason or another, she knows she will be able to find another job eventually.

Jordan.

Foster care and early education. Jordan entered the foster care system at the age of eleven, right before he started the sixth grade. Fortunately for Jordan he was able to remain in the same school throughout his middle school years. Jordan had some behavioral challenges that caused him to get suspended a couple of times. During this time, he was not living with family, which caused him to act out. He remembers barely stepping into the classroom when his teacher would give him classwork and direct him to the principal's office. During his high school years, he struggled with the issues that arose from being placed in care: "I was struggling with my personal development and family issues and needed counseling and therapy and just consistent guidance to help support how I acted in the classroom." Jordan's high school years were better as he was placed with his sister who gave him a lot of love and support. He was also going to therapy, was involved in a church and he had mentors. All of this made the difference between him getting suspended and being able to focus and be present in the classroom.

Growing up he never considered himself to be a dumb kid. He always had a lot of confidence, but he did struggle in math. Jordan stated that his sense of self-worth was tied up in his ability or inability to do good, whether it would be in sports or in the classroom. He described school as a refuge and a safe space. He had friends, and a sense of community and no one really

asked him about his personal life. He excelled at compartmentalizing: there was school Jordan, a home Jordan, and a sports Jordan.

There were just these different parts of myself, because, ultimately, being in foster care sometimes means that you are divorced from normalcy, I guess. So your sense of, yeah, I go home. I see my mom, I see my dad, they ask about my day, we take trips together. They're involved in my life. They want to know who I'm dating. All of these things that seem to be normal aspects of a family were not there.

Jordan shared that perhaps these are the reasons why he sometimes felt anxious or depressed as a child. He stated that even today, some days are better than others are.

Experiencing the foster care system. Jordan spoke about negative stigmas he encountered growing up. Both of his biological parents struggled with substance abuse and his mother battled severe mental health issues. Jordan also witnessed a lot of violence growing up. As he was speaking about these parts of his life, he was taken aback by the dichotomy of his confidence and being able to excel in sports and his academics and at the same time feel extremely anxious.

Nobody knew that was a part of my life, and so that stigma of, 'damn, if somebody finds out that I don't live with my mom and my dad, they're going to view me negatively.' I was just deathly afraid of people finding that out about me and judging me on that and not judging me because I was a good athlete, or I was smart, or I was in these AP courses.

Because of these elements, Jordan created what he calls an ecosystem around himself and only a selected few knew what was going on in his life.

In addition to stigmas that arose because of external factors, Jordan also highlighted the stigma of being a black man. More specifically, Jordan highlighted the intersection of being a black male and the lack of stability in his family:

I'm not sure exactly the depths of which that still interacts and impacts who I am. I just know that I don't want to be like my father or that legacy of maybe men in general, but specifically African-American men leaving a trail of broken relationships behind.

When speaking about the challenges he faced, Jordan stated that before entering care he felt like a victim and described his experience as a boat that was tossed in the waves. He knew he was valuable, but he also felt dispensable. Jordan knew there was someone who loved him, but he shared it was hard to truly believe in that and validate it when those who are supposed to love him the most were not there. His foster care experience allowed him to realize that some things may never be the way he would like them to be. All of the emotions Jordan described led him to create and curate an image of who he wanted to be. He could navigate multiple circles with almost surgical precision. He could walk into a room and within seconds, he could figure out how to speak, and how to interact because of a need to fit in.

I needed to be this person and be validated, because, ultimately, when you're in foster care, your self-image is extinguishable. It's never solid. It's never steady. Again, your sense of normalcy isn't there, and so you are consistently trying to perform.

Jordan's time in care impacted him significantly on different levels, especially in how he viewed himself. Jordan also spoke about the day he exited the foster care system.

On his 18th birthday, his social worker went to the school campus and said, "You're 18, here's your final check, all your resources stop." In that moment all he could think of was that it was all done, there wasn't an opportunity to process or to mourn, it was simply over with the sign of a pen:

After care, it was being conscious about what I had gone through and what my family had gone through and the anger and the frustration and the pain and the sadness of, damn, I aged out of foster care. What does that mean? What does that mean for my life? What does that mean for me moving forward?

Jordan was aware of the independence he had just gained. He knew he would be good and that he could do great things. He also knew he would need people in his life to help him and to continuously support him in holding the vision he had for himself.

Graduate school motivations and expectations. Jordan shared that his dreams before foster care were focused on survival. He wanted to get a good job, get out of the hood, take care of his younger siblings and get as far away from the negative home environment as he could. After foster care, his view of the world expanded and his possibilities grew along with his personal goals and aspirations. When questioned about his decision to pursue a graduate level degree, Jordan shared that he graduated college at the height of the recession and he struggled with finding employment. He began interning for one of the largest cities in the country and he was really enjoying it. He wanted to impact policy and law and that's when he began to contemplate graduate school. At the same time, Jordan reconnected with a program that had given him a scholarship for college after he graduated from high school. This same program would pay for a tutor for the graduate record examinations better known as the GRE. His colleagues at the internship were also informing him that if he wanted to impact law and policy he should consider a master's degree in public administration or public policy. Jordan had never heard of these degrees before, so he began doing research. Concerning graduate school Jordan shared:

I started to see it not as a foreign concept, but like, man, I can actually do this, because I had those tutors and people in my life and was asking those questions. They were like, well, check out these schools, and go to the school and visit. Slowly but surely, I was gaining more and more information, more confidence about the process, that led me up to apply.

Jordan did have some self-doubt as he entered graduate school. He also emphasized that it was very expensive, and he had to take out student loans to be able to pay for his program. Nonetheless, he grew a lot and his sense of self-worth also grew as he was going to class and actually doing the work:

I was standing out, as I was gaining confidence. I'm like, man, I know this stuff. I'm passionate about this stuff. This is way better than undergrad where I'm taking classes I

have no interest in, these general ed classes. I'm interested in social justice. I'm interested in how the law works, and so it was fulfilling something in me, a calling in me.

Jordan obtained his master's degree in Public Policy from a private Christian University in Southern California. He described his experiences in the program as solid. He had a wonderful college counselor who had his back and would go to bat for him if needed.

Jordan credits the access to resources such as internship opportunities as essential for his success: "I think it was super formulative [*sic*] and it was really like the internships, I think I learned more and gained my passions because I was actually doing work too. I think that was really helpful for me." Although Jordan had a wonderful experience in graduate school, he also had to overcome some challenges.

Challenges in graduate school. One of Jordan's most challenging moments in graduate school was when he got a C minus in one of his math courses and had to retake the course. Although he was excelling in his other courses, which included philosophy and writing, the fact that he had received a bad grade in a math course, overshadowed his accomplishments. In addition to struggling with his academics, Jordan also faced financial barriers. During the summer, he had no place to go home to, so he got a job on campus and also took out additional loans. Jordan had to also surpass his battles with mental health. It was when he was facing these academic, financial and personal barriers that he had the greatest doubt: "Those were the moments where I was like, dude, when I was in greatest need of either resources or that my grades were slipping, that's when I felt like, man, I may not be able to finish this." He was able to overcome all of these barriers because of his faith: "God showed up in very specific ways"

In addition to relying on his faith, he also continued to explore therapy. He continued to persevere, and at the same time, he learned to give himself grace. It took people continuously

telling him to be patient with himself and loving him through those moments when he was not able to be patient with himself.

Jordan also highlighted feelings of inferiority not only as a person of color, but also as a former foster you:

I think unique to my experience not only as a person with a less than ideal upbringing, but also as an African-American person. So I'm bringing that to the table as well, and knowing that, as a black male, we are really underrepresented in graduate schools. Then as a foster youth, or a former foster youth, excuse me, we are even more underrepresented in those spaces. So we are much more likely to be in an institution like prison than we are to be in college. So if you understand that, the fact of the matter is, because we're not there, of course then these settings weren't even created, or they're not a comfortable setting to be in.

Jordan was able to overcome all of the barriers he faced in graduate school. Throughout the interview, he also highlighted the multiple elements that led to his academic success.

Elements that contributed to graduate school success. Jordan was able to identify a number of elements that contributed to his success in graduate school. Some of these began long before he even considered applying to a graduate program. Jordan believed that having access to internship opportunities was fundamental to his decision to pursue a graduate degree. The internship allowed him to explore his passions and determine if it was something he could do long term. It also allowed him to engage with other professionals who exposed him to ideas and opportunities he did not even know existed. Therapy was an additional contributing factor to Jordan's success, it gave him the capacity to heal, and it also allowed him to make space so that he could focus on his academics. It also led him to become, a more confident, well rounded, and complete human being.

Jordan also credited the relationships he built as being essential to his success: relationships with his graduate school academic advisor, and his undergrad professors whom he identified as his surrogate parents. Jordan also credited his resilience and his ability to ask for

help for succeeding in graduate school. Jordan was aware of the areas that he struggled in such as math and he would network with individuals who were really good in the courses where he needed the most help:

I think I was able to say, shoot, this is something I'm missing or I'm struggling in academically. Who's the smartest person up in here? I'm about to be their friend. You going to coffee? You going to coffee? You want coffee? I'll get a coffee for you.

Many people in Jordan's life believed in his ability to obtain a graduate degree, including his sister, his family, his close friends, his academic advisor in graduate school and his professors from undergraduate school. He was able to rely on them as he was going through his graduate school journey. One impact of his graduate program was on his personal sense of possibilities. He felt like he could do anything he set his mind to. As far as professional impact, obtaining a master's degree created a better career path for him. After undergraduate school he struggled with obtaining employment, but now that he has a master's degree, obtaining employment has become easier:

I've been able to do some really cool stuff. I've been able to work across the country, work on projects that matter across the country, and really align my passions and things that I'm passionate about with my profession. It's because of my graduate degree.

Collective Themes

This section of Chapter Four highlights the collective themes that emerged from the interviews. First, the researcher presents the themes in Table 3 in order from highest to lowest by the number of participants who identified each theme and the frequency with which they were mentioned. Second, the researcher presents the six most prevalent themes in detail. Lastly, the researcher presents the remainder of the themes based on the number of participants who shared the collective experience. A total of 34 themes emerged altogether, six of which were most in

common, meaning at least five of the six respondents made a reference to the theme in their interview.

Table 3 highlights the themes that emerged from an analysis of the data. Column 1 identifies the themes, column two highlights the number of participants who reported the theme, and column three depicts the frequency. Although they are pictured in order from high to low, that is not to say that the less mentioned themes are not important, as they could still be important for the greater population.

Table 3

Thematic Categories

Theme	Number of Participants who Identified Theme	Frequency
1. Shame/ Stigma	6	15
2. Resourceful/asking for help	6	15
3. Confidence in self/Internal drive	6	9
4. Mentors	5	14
5. Proving others wrong	5	7
6. Mental Health	5	5
7. Difficulty with writing	4	8
8. High expectations of self	4	7
9. Survival	4	7
10. Financial barriers	4	6
11. Failing or almost failing	4	6
12. Overcoming Stigma	4	5
13. Graduate degrees open doors	4	5
14. Did not talk about foster care	4	4
15. Resilience/Grit	4	4
16. Expectations of professors being high (unhelpful)	3	6
17. Loneliness	3	4
18. Self-advocacy	3	4
19. Internships	3	4
20. Community	3	4
21. Grew as a person in grad school	3	3
22. School as a safe haven	3	3
23. Peer Group/Cohort	2	4
24. Behavioral Challenges	2	3
25. Continuation School	2	3

(continued)

Theme	Number of Participants who Identified Theme	Frequency
26. Being able to focus on school when environment is safe	2	3
27. Enjoyed learning	2	3
28. Foster Care allowed for exposure to new opportunities	2	3
29. Multiple Schools	2	2
30. Graduate School was a second opportunity	2	2
31. Struggled with standardize test	2	2
32. 2008 economic crisis had impact on pursuing a master's degree	2	2
33. Learning Disability	1	3
34. Education was not prioritized by the Foster Care system	1	1

Six most prevalent themes. Findings in the data revealed a total of six themes that were experienced by five or more of the participants. These were: (a) shame/stigma, (b) resourceful/asking for help, (c) Confidence in self /internal drive, (d) mentors, (e) proving others wrong, and (f) mental health. The themes will be presented in detail in the following sections.

Shame/stigma. One of the themes most frequently referenced by the participants involved the feelings of shame and stigma that emerged from being placed into care, or that were a product of their experiences in foster care. Marianna shared that although she did not recognize the stigma in the moment as a foster youth, in looking back at her group home experience, the stigma was apparent during outings. Marianna disclosed that she felt the stigma when she would walk into a store with her group home peers and the group home staff. Due to staffing ratios, staff are required to be within a certain distance of the foster youth they are supervising. This meant that if they went to a store or any public location, neither the staff nor foster youth could stay in the car and wait. Marianna stated:

We couldn't stay in the car right, we had to go with staff and if one girl had to get off to buy something, then the rest of us also had to get off, and so it was definitely stigmatizing, because first of all I don't look like any of them.

Olivia's experience was different from Marianna in that being placed into foster care literally saved her life. Olivia expressed that the issues in her home life were so severe; she didn't believe she would live past the age of 16. Although foster care saved Olivia's life, she could not escape the stereotypes and the responses these would elicit. Some of the stereotypes placed on Olivia due to her status as a foster youth were that she would become a teen mom, or that she was a juvenile delinquent.

Alicia's experience with shame and stigma was slightly different from those of Olivia and Marianna. The shame encountered by Alicia came about because of her experience in foster care. Due to the lack of educational rigor in her middle school and high school years, Alicia was not able to develop a good foundation in English or math. By the time Alicia got to college, the impact of this was noticeable and it affected Alicia significantly:

I felt like I was treated like a non-native English speaker, because I couldn't understand what these people were saying. I took algebra 10 times. There were only two teachers teaching it. So, each semester I saw them five times.

Thomas described the stigma placed on foster youth as "being too damaged" or "not being up to par as other people." Thomas stated,

I always had a fear of not being as presentable or not being very normal... I don't know how to explain it, like you know in society or probably it's just in my head, I didn't feel I was able to present myself as normal or as traditional as other people who grow up in less stressful environments.

Jordan described feelings of stigma because of the factors that caused him to be placed into foster care, including poverty, a father who struggled with substance abuse, and a mother who battled severe mental health issues. Jordan also encountered shame because of his experience in foster care, and racial stigma that arose from him being African American. It is important to highlight that all three male participants also referenced the shame and stigma they faced as children in foster care and the impact this continues to have on them as adults.

Carl summarized these feeling by sharing the following: “While I achieved surviving the chaos that surrounded my life, the toll it took on my self-confidence and sense of self as a construct still affect me to this day.” An additional theme that was as significant as stigma/shame in terms of frequency was the theme of being resourceful and/or having the ability to ask for help.

Resourceful/asking for help. As highlighted in Table 3, the theme of resourceful/asking for help was identified within the context of the interviews by all six participants, and similarly to the theme of shame/stigma, the frequency was 15. The participants did not necessarily identify themselves as being resourceful, yet they were deemed as resourceful based on their responses to the interview questions. For example, when Jordan was struggling with a math course in his graduate program he intentionally built relationships with individuals who were really good at math. Jordan was able to find a commonality with those individuals and also identify an area of need in them so that the relationship could be mutually beneficial:

I was really linked up with a lot of the Chinese students, number one, because they love Kobe Bryant, for some reason. They just love Kobe, and I love Kobe, so that was one good connection. They really appreciated basketball. Then, number two, I was like, look, you need help on your papers. I can help you with your papers and your presentations and your speeches. Can you help me with my econ? Can you help me with my math?

Thomas’s resourcefulness was particularly evident when he shared his experience about not being able to access financial aid and ultimately sharing his barriers with his professor:

I thought like I was going to have to quit until eventually like I told my professor I’ve already reached my wits’ end and I exhausted all the resources with financial aid and everyone I could possibly speak to and then finally I told the professor “...this is what I’m going through.”

Thomas’s ability to ask for help was essential to him remaining in the program.

Like Thomas, Carl too was able to ask for help when he was struggling with law school: “I got by asking for help towards the end, there was a lot of ‘I should have done so sooner’ but I did so eventually, after, a lot of trying to do it myself.”

The female participants also shared situations in which they displayed traits of resourcefulness, or instances in which they asked for help in order to be able to complete their graduate studies. Unfortunately for Marianna, her research methods professor was not very approachable. When Marianna needed assistance with the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) a statistics software, she reached out to her supervisor’s wife: “I knew that my supervisor’s wife is excellent in that, so she taught me a lot of it. I spent hours at her house just getting the data analyzed...it was quite the challenge.”

Alicia too was able to reach out to her connections when she needed help. Alicia continuously expressed her struggles with writing. Fortunately, she was able to reach out to her aunt for support in this area: “Having my aunt, who is kind of like my mom, grade my papers every time I wrote them. She would take a red marker and help with punctuation.” Due to working full time and trying to excel in her education, Alicia, like Marianna was not able to access the resources offered by the school, therefore she needed to be resourceful and obtain the support from elsewhere.

Like her peers, Olivia too had the ability to ask for help when she was struggling: “I learned to communicate a lot with my professors because, they’re the ones that could maybe give me an extension on a paper or, extended time on tests. I also worked very closely sometimes with the disabled student’s program.”

Confidence in self/internal drive. The third theme that was identified for all six participants was that they had some sort of internal drive, as if quitting their program would not

be a viable option regardless of the barriers that would come before them. For Alicia the internal drive was instilled by her mentor who continuously told her she was going to be a part of the 1% of former foster youth who obtain a degree. Regardless of the challenges Alicia faced in regard to finances and academics, she would continue to try. Even after she failed her algebra class ten times, she would try again.

Marianna's self-drive was evident when she was asked about the challenges she faced in graduate school and if she ever felt any doubts that she would complete her program, Marianna's response included the following: "To me it was almost like not a choice to not complete it."

Olivia's self-drive was evident as she spoke about her determination to accomplish any goal she sets for herself. She shared that regardless of how many times she falls off the horse, she always gets back up and tries again. Traits of self-confidence and self-drive were also evident in the male participants throughout their interviews.

Carl shared conflicting thoughts about his self-drive, but even though he was hesitant about these feelings, he was still able to acknowledge his self-drive. When asked about the elements that contributed to his success in graduate school he stated the following: "I guess I had some self-drive."

Thomas identified the internal drive as grit he stated that part of what contributed to his success in graduate school was "having that drive and dedication and work ethic to actually persevere and not just hang out with friends or push off that paper." Thomas's desire to excel in his academics was greater than the temptation of hanging out with his friends.

Like his peers, Jordan too demonstrated confidence in himself or self-drive throughout his interview. Specific to his experience in graduate school, Jordan shared that as he was succeeding in his classes he was building more confidence in himself: "I'm like, man, I know

this stuff. I'm passionate about this stuff." Throughout the interviews, the trait of confidence appeared to be influential to participants' ability to complete graduate school.

Mentors. Five out of the six participants highlighted the impact of having someone in their lives who served as a mentor: someone who believed in the participants before they were able to believe in themselves. More specifically, the participants highlighted how the mentors influenced their ability to obtain a graduate level degree. Alicia was fortunate to meet her mentor while she was attending the non-public school. Although her mentor passed away after she exited the foster care system, his influence was grand, and he continued to be a motivating force for her to reach some of the highest levels of academia: "living my mentor's name. I took that as a huge responsibility when he passed away, and I think I've definitely succeeded in meeting his expectations and then some."

Olivia too highlighted the important role her mentor had in her life. Even when Olivia did not see her own academic potential, her mentor was there to show her otherwise: "I don't know that I ever saw myself with academic potential. I think my mentor was always like you can do this." Olivia also highlighted traits possessed by her mentor including being non-judgmental and unconditional.

Marianna's mentor was her employer. Marianna shared that her mentor was a firm believer and supporter of her academic endeavors.

Jordan was fortunate to become connected with mentors when he joined a church community. Throughout his academic journey, Jordan was able to connect with individuals who had his back and assisted him in obtaining academic success, including two professors in his undergraduate program and his academic advisor in his graduate program.

For Thomas, his social worker was the individual who encouraged him to apply to law school at the age of 19. Even though Thomas was not sure how the entire process would unfold, he still proceeded with the application thanks to the encouragement of his social worker.

Proving others wrong. One interesting theme that emerged for five out of the six participants was a determination or desire to prove others wrong. This was primarily highlighted when the participants spoke about challenges they faced with individuals. Marianna was determined to prove her research methods professor wrong. Marianna had been dismissed by her professor when Marianna asked for help. Marianna became adamant to not ask for assistance any longer. In the interview she shared: “I can do it, I don’t wanna ask you for help, but let me prove that I can do this.”

Carl’s experience was slightly different in that he was struggling with a roommate and wanted to “get him off his back.” This was part of what motivated Carl to pursue graduate school.

Like Carl and Marianna, Olivia too had a desire to prove someone wrong. In this case it was her mother: “I was so determined to prove her wrong that it...that coping mechanism benefited me.”

For Thomas it was not so much that he wanted to prove others wrong, but wanting to prove that he could be successful. After he decided to leave the law school, his two options were to return to his home state and attempt to re-enter foster care or find a different graduate program. Thomas decided to pursue another graduate program: “I’m a law school drop-out and now I’m going back with my tail between my legs. Going back in foster care and letting everyone know that I failed.”

Alicia also shared that proving others wrong fueled her desire to continue moving forward when challenges stood before her: “If people said, ‘You’re not going to make it,’ I think I was like watch me prove you wrong. Because that fueled my fire along the way.”

A final experience that was collectively shared amongst five of the six participants was their struggles with mental health.

Mental health. The final prevalent theme that emerged from the data was the impact of mental health in the lives of the study participants. Marianna, Jordan, and Thomas all shared their experience, specifically with depression. Marianna shared that as she was going to graduate school she encountered episodes of depression and panic attacks. Jordan stated that he struggled with depression and anxiety. Alicia did not share specifics of battling mental health in graduate school, but she did disclose that in her younger years she was extremely depressed and even attempted suicide. Jordan, Alicia, and Olivia all had mothers who struggled with mental health, which was a contributing factor to all three of them being removed from their homes. Even as professional adult individuals, all three participants mentioned having vivid recollections of their mothers’ mental health illness.

The six most prevalent themes as identified by the participants in the study were either helpful in their journey to and through graduate school or presented a challenge. In depth details for each of the six themes have been provided in an effort to illuminate each. For the remainder of the themes, I will touch upon them briefly by providing one example for each.

Themes experienced by four of the six participants. A total of nine themes were relevant to four out of the six study participants. These include: (a) difficulty with writing, (b) high expectations of self, (c) survival, (d) financial barriers, (e) failing or almost failing out, (f) overcoming stigma, (g) the belief that graduate degrees open doors, (h) did not talk about foster

care, and (i) resilience. Four of the six participants shared their barriers with writing. They were able to identify the gaps in their education due to their experience in foster care and how this impacted their ability to write well in graduate school. One of the participants indicated that her disability affected her ability to write well.

The next theme that was shared by four of the six participants was having high expectations of themselves. Specifically, when sharing about graduate school, four of the six participants expected to do well academically, not only pass their courses, but to do so with excellent grades. One of the participants shared: “I expected to go in and read everything teachers told me to read and make straight As and I was really determined.”

The next theme that was shared was about survival. Two of the participants highlighted their experience with surviving foster care, while two additional participants shared about their experience in trying to survive graduate school. One of the participants shared: “It came down to, financial aid. I needed to be able to survive.” For this participant in particular, being able to receive financial aid through his graduate program meant that he would have his basic needs cover such as food, clothing, and shelter. The participants also spoke about financial barriers they faced while they were going through their graduate school journey. Four of the six participants spoke about taking out substantial student loans including one for \$100,000, one for \$90,000, and one for \$70,000.

Failing or almost failing out was something four of the six participants also had in common. One of the participants almost did not make it through her internship due to being distracted by her employer. Two participants spoke about barely making passing grades, and one participant shared his frustration when he had to retake a math course due to not getting a

passing grade: “When I got that C minus and had to take that class over, the level of shame and embarrassment was just at an all-time high.”

In addition to failing or almost failing out, four of the six participants also spoke about overcoming stigma. These participants spoke about the importance of no longer believing what society and their minds said to them over and over again. One participant described it in the following words:

You have to do it on your own. You’re not going to get any help. Those are just lies, and so they’re stigmas, and they’re lies. So I had to overcome that lie by being real. It took me hitting rock bottom to say, bro, you ain’t going to fake it no more. You’re going to fake it all the way until they kick your behind out of this school. Either you’re going to get help, or you’re going to be out of this school.

In addition to overcoming stigma, four of the six participants also shared their belief that going through graduate school opened doors for them. These participants spoke about having new career opportunities available to them that were not available prior to graduate school. They also spoke about being more financially stable, and they also gained additional confidence. One respondent explained:

I’m also more comfortable where if I got fired, or I lost my job, or I wanted to quit, I feel like I have a graduate degree level and I’m gonna be ok in the world and eventually find a job somewhere doing something. As opposed to not having a degree or competing with 400 other applicants with a bachelor’s level degree.

Another theme shared by four of the six participants was that they did not speak about their experience in foster care while they were in graduate school. One participant emphasized that he did not speak about his foster care experience because it was never brought up. The other three shared that they did not speak about their foster care experience because they did not want to be treated differently. One participant stated,

I steered away from that because I just didn’t want to be perceived as um.... I didn’t want to get like special treatment, and so um... so when the expectations were high I felt like it was fair because they probably were high for everyone.

The last theme that was shared by four of the participants was resilience. Every story by each of the six participants is one of resilience, however four of these participants actually spoke about resilience and what that was like in their lives. One of the participants shared: “Resiliency is less, I would say, really about the individual and more about how that individual interacts with other individuals.” Another participant shared “I think you know part of it is that we’re resilient and part of it is that we’ve had people in our lives that have opened up some type of opportunity or belief system within us.”

In addition to the nine themes identified by four of the participants, an additional seven themes were shared by half of the participants.

Themes experienced by three of the six participants. A total of seven themes were collectively experienced by three of the participants. These included: (a) expectations of others being high/ or unhelpful, (b) feeling lonely, (c) exercising self-advocacy, (d) the importance of internships, (e) community, (f) personal growth through graduate school, and (g) seeing school as a safe haven.

Three of the six participants shared their experience with professors in their graduate programs having high expectations of them, and that they were not helpful. The professors expected the students to have a greater grasp on the courses. When the students asked for assistance, the professors were not helpful. One participant shared, “It was clear what she was expecting, and she was expecting definitely 100% even in the areas where I wasn’t as efficient. And so that’s really what challenged me because I knew I had some gaps in certain areas.” In addition to dealing with high expectations of professors being high and unhelpful, half of the participants experienced feeling lonely. One of the participants spoke about the loneliness she experienced while growing up in the foster care system. Two of the participants spoke about the

loneliness they felt when they went away to school. For the last two participants, the loneliness was so much that it caused them both to leave their initial programs.

Exercising self-advocacy was a trait that was highlighted by three of the participants. They shared about being advocates and how being able to do this allowed them to receive specific services such as being able to attend narcotics anonymous (NA) meetings or receiving additional assistance in school. One participant stated: “If I wasn’t the person that advocated for myself and demanded support, I would not be where I am today.”

Three of the six also spoke about the impact of internships either before or during graduate school. One participant stated: “I think I learned more and gained my passions because I was actually doing work too. I think that was really helpful for me.”

An additional theme identified by half of the participants was the importance of community. Although five of the six participants highlighted their mentor, three of the participants emphasized the importance of not only having one person who can believe in you when you are unable to believe in yourself, but they specifically stressed the importance of community. One participant stated: “I think community is everything. I think that’s probably the biggest piece. Higher degrees are not about the individuals. It really is about the community around the individual.” A different participant stated: “I was able to start to build this community of support for myself and then I became successful.”

In addition to highlighting the importance of community, half of the participants also spoke about the personal growth that took place while they were in graduate school. One participant described it in the following terms: “To me it was an opportunity to learn about the issues that had affected my life, so it did highlight a lot of personal things, with the academic material that was being presented to me.”

The last theme that was shared by half of the study participants was that they saw school as a safe haven. For these individuals, the chaos in their home life was so extensive, school was the one place they felt safe. In addition to the seven themes that were commonly shared by three of the participants, an additional 10 themes were commonly identified by two of the six participants.

Themes experienced by two of the six participants. The ten themes that were identified by two of the six participants were (a) the impact of a peer/cohort group, (b) behavioral challenges, (c) continuation schools, (d) being able to focus in school when the environment is safe, (e) enjoyed learning, (f) foster care allowed for exposure to new opportunities, (g) attended multiple schools, (h) saw graduate school as a second opportunity, (i) struggled with standardized tests, and (j) identified the 2008 economic crisis as an impact on pursuing a master's degree. Two of the six participants shared the importance of being a part of a peer group or cohort while they were going through their master's program. Both of these individuals shared that their cohort group was supportive. It was helpful that everyone in the cohort was going through the same process.

Behavioral challenges were also impactful for two of the study participants. Both of these shared their experiences of getting suspended from grade school due to their behaviors. Both individuals were also able to identify that their home life had an impact on the way they behaved in school. Two of the participants had a common experience of attending continuation high schools. For both of these individuals, continuation schools were not helpful to their academics.

Two of the participants spoke about the impact of living in a chaotic environment and not being able to learn. Once these participants felt safe in their environment, they were better able to grasp the information that was provided to them through their education.

Two of the participants also expressed how much they enjoyed learning. One of these participants shared: “I wanted to be in class, I wanted to learn the material, I wanted to do well in my internship.” Even when learning was not easy for these two, they enjoyed the process.

Two of the participants were able to identify that being placed into foster care exposed them to new opportunities, such as connecting with individuals who have an education or programs that offered them internships. Two of the participants experience school instability due to having to attend multiple schools. One attended six different high schools. The other participant attended three different middle schools and three different high schools.

Seeing graduate school as a second opportunity was an additional common experience identified by two of the participants. These individuals shared that due to difficulties in academics they encountered in the K-12 education system, graduate school was an opportunity for them to prove to themselves that they could succeed. Two of the participants shared their experience with standardized tests. For one of these participants, not doing well on a standardized test prevented her from get into the first graduate program of her choice.

The final common experience for two of the participants was that the 2008 economic crisis impacted their decision to pursue a graduate degree. One of these individuals shared:

People went back to get master’s degrees because it was a way to save themselves economically through student loans, and the jobs I use to be able to apply for with a bachelor degree where starting to require master’s degrees, and so I felt like a master’s program would, one, would give me the challenge to grow professional, emotionally, and personally but also give me a competitive edge in the work field if I wanted to change directions in my career.

Two final themes emerged from the data. These included disabilities, and education not being prioritized by the system.

Themes experienced by one of the six participants. Two different participants highlighted a single theme unique to them among the six participants. These are still worthy of

mentioning as they may be important to both this target population and the greater graduate student population.

The first theme is the impact of having a learning disability. One participant shared that she has a substantial learning disability that has always made school very challenging, although she managed to obtain a graduate level degree. Throughout her interview she shared the impact of the learning disability, including having to take internship work home, and having to explain to professors and supervisors about her disability:

In every field since graduate school I've had to educate my supervisor about my disability. They're really frustrated that I have these grammatical errors and I'm like... I don't think you understand that I don't see that, and I'm not trying to be a bad staff person. I think really thinking about how we create spaces where it's more inclusive for people that maybe don't have the same abilities that I've been blessed with.

The other theme that was mentioned by one participant was the belief that education was not prioritized by the system. This participant shared the challenges she faced behaviorally, even speaking about her experience in juvenile hall. By the time she arrived to graduate school, she embraced it as a second opportunity to be a learner, since while she was in care, her placement was dictated by her behavior and safety.

Advice

Table 4 contains advice and recommendations from the participants to individuals who were formerly in care and may be considering graduate school. All six participants were encouraging overall in their advice related the pursuit of a graduate degree. The key ideas that resonated from their advice included finding and following their passions and connecting with mentors or a community of people for support through the graduate school journey. The participants also spoke about having a good work ethic, and the importance of doing research on the graduate programs that are being considered before selecting and enrolling. Lastly, the

participants shared the reasons why graduate school is a good option, including an increase in confidence and self-esteem.

Table 4

Advice for Young Persons Formerly in Foster Care Who May Be Considering Graduate School

Participant	Advice
Marianna	“DO IT!” because there’s so many things that can stop you from it, it’s almost like find reasons why you won’t be stopped from doing it...I would highlight the many reasons why they should, and I think some of those could be obviously personal reasons, like being able to challenge those historic dysfunctions in the family, knowledge is something that you will never regret, there’s this self-esteem and you just feel better about yourself, you feel more confident, more capable. Also, the kind of difference you can make in your field is even greater and I think... I think specially for those coming out of care, you’ve already endured all that in your life, there’s nothing but greatness to come from it.”
Thomas	“I think it’s grounds grit on having that work ethic, understanding your goal and what you want long term. A lot of people don’t know what they really want in life and they don’t know which path they want to take. I think just having that grit and that work ethic, I think having that alone well at least put you on the trajectory on where you should be. Eventually it will end the journey and the process, trusting the process will eventually lead you to the path where you would want to be.”
Alicia	“I would say whoever’s supporting you, guiding you, mentoring you, eat up what they’re saying. Let them help you... I would say it’s going to be hard, so hard, but so rewarding. The Chafee funds, ETV funds use that up. If you’re going to graduate school, please use any of those programs, the scholar programs, all of that. Guardian Scholar programs. There’s so many avenues to pay for it.”
Carl	“Besides run far far away... I would say ultimately. I guess general advice is you know do a lot more research on the programs, actually go see what the jobs are, actually ask what may up in the end, I would say that, I mean even do a career test before hand to see if that’s really what you want to do.”
Olivia	To connect and find their cheerleaders “...for me that was a big key is making sure that you have your cheerleaders that are gonna be able to help push you through, particularly if you are getting a social work degree. I’s very triggering, and not just with your own trauma but, you are going in and you are having conversations about inequalities of the world right, like that shit is hard whether you grew up in inequalities or not. And if it’s not hard, you probably shouldn’t be a social worker, like there is no emotional connection to that.”
Jordan	“Graduate school is much more precise. It’s a higher level of work, I would assume. This time, you need to be able to be more self-reliant, but it’s about the community around that person that I think can make or break a person. I think, for a foster youth or former youth that’s assuming that they want to go, building community and finding the best opportunity for them to maximize their talents. Also, do something that they’re passionate about. I think that’s probably the best advice that I can give them. The money will come if you can do things that you’re passionate about. Resources and opportunities will come if you do something that you really, really, really feel called to do. But, again, you need a community around you to support you.”

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the detailed findings of the study, including participant demographics, individual participant portraits crafted from the interview responses, the collective themes that emerged from an analysis of the interview data, and advice from the participants. Six individuals participated in this study, three females and three males. All participants except one entered foster care between the ages of 11 and 15. The one individual entered at age one, was adopted at five years of age and re-entered foster care at 13. All of the participants exited foster care between 18 and 19 years of age. The participants were in foster care between three to ten years, with the majority in foster care six to ten years. The ethnic groups identified by the participants included one Hispanic, one African American, two Caucasian, and one who identified as half-Caucasian and half Native American. The foster care settings experienced by participants included mostly group homes and foster homes. Two of the participants were also placed in juvenile hall at some point in their foster care journey, and two were also placed in residential treatment facilities. One participant had the opportunity to be placed with a relative. The graduate degrees obtained by the participants were primarily master's in social work. Four of the six had MSWs. One of the participants had a master's degree in public policy and one had a Juris Doctorate and a library science degree. Two of the participants had completed two graduate degrees and one will begin a second graduate degree this summer.

In addition to the demographics of the participants, the chapter included portraits of each of the participants that were crafted from the interview responses. The portraits illustrated stories of resilience and determination, outlining their journey from foster care to graduate school. The portraits also revealed some of the challenges encountered by each of the participants, along with their recollection of how they overcame the challenges.

Chapter Four also included the collective themes that emerged from the data. A total of 34 themes surfaced, six of them most commonly shared and 28 that were not as common, but still worthy of mentioning. The themes were presented from highest to lowest by the number of participants who identified the theme and the frequency with which they were mentioned. Nine themes were collectively experienced by four of the six participants. Seven themes were collectively experienced by half of the participants. Ten themes were collectively experienced by two of the six participants, and two themes each were experienced by one participant.

The final component of Chapter Four is advice from the participants to former foster youth who may be considering graduate school. Overall, the participants' advice was encouraging and included themes such as being passionate about one's pursuits, building a community of support, and having a good work ethic. The participants also emphasized the importance of doing research on graduate programs and perhaps even working in the field of study choice. The participants also shared insight on possible motivations for others to pursue graduate school, including challenging the historic dysfunctions in their family.

Chapter Five will discuss in further depth the experiences of the participants, including the most common themes such as shame/stigma, being resourceful/asking for help, confidence in self/self-drive, proving others wrong, and the impact of mental health. Chapter Five will also explore three themes that were not as common but were important to individual participant's stories. These include loneliness, the importance of community, and graduate school opening doors. The themes will be discussed in relation to the research question and study theoretical framework. Chapter Five will also include conclusions, implications of the findings for practice, and recommendations for further research.

Chapter Five: Discussion Findings, Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

Chapter Five is the final chapter of this study; it includes an overview of the study, a discussion of the key findings, conclusions, implications for practice and or policy, and recommendations for further study. The academic experiences of foster youth at the K-12 and undergraduate levels have been significantly explored by researchers. One area that is yet to be explored is the lived academic experiences of individuals who spent time in foster care and went on to receive postgraduate degrees. Given the obstacles identified by the literature at the K-12 and undergraduate education levels, it would be beneficial to understand how some individuals were able to surpass the life and academic adversities they faced and reach some of the highest levels of academia.

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study is to explore the lived experiences of former foster youth who have completed graduate level academic programs in order to discover and describe the elements that these individuals believe led to their academic success. For the purposes of this study, academic success will refer to the completion of a graduate level program.

Research Question

The primary research question for this study is: What do former foster youth who have completed graduate level programs report as elements that have contributed to their academic success?

Study Design Overview

The study utilized a qualitative approach and portraiture in methodology. The researcher conducted six interviews with individuals who had spent time in foster care and now hold

graduate level degrees. Two of the interviews were face to face, two of them were conducted via Skype and two of them were conducted over the phone. The interviews consisted of fifteen questions, for some of the participants follow up questions were posed for clarification purposes. Additionally, seven demographic questions were emailed to each participant prior to the day of the interview.

A qualitative approach was selected in efforts to obtain an in-depth perspective of the lived experiences of individuals who had been placed into foster care and were able to obtain graduate level degrees. Portraiture methodology was utilized to capture the depth of the participants' experiences and to better illustrate the compelling stories of their journey from foster care to graduate school. The researcher interviewed three females and three males, the interviews were semi-structured and included open-ended questions. All of the interviews were transcribed and sent back to the participants for accuracy. The researcher asked the participants to review the transcriptions and return them back within a week if they had any changes. After receiving the transcriptions that had been reviewed, the researcher began reading each of the transcriptions. Themes began to emerge, and the researcher began identifying the themes on an Excel spreadsheet. The researcher then elected to present the themes based on the number of participants who identified the theme, and the frequency in which the theme was identified. The data is presented in two sections: first, a portraiture methodology is used to tell the story of each of the participants. The second section included a presentation of the primary thematic categories that emerged from the interviews.

Discussion of Key Findings

Nine key findings will be discussed including the six findings that were most common amongst the participants, three additional findings will also be explored. The nine themes will be

introduced based on the findings that contributed to the success of the participants in completing graduate school and barriers that the participants had to overcome. Within the findings that contributed to the success of the participants these will be introduced by traits such as self confidence/self-drive and resourceful/asking for help, and external factors such as the importance of community, mentors, proving others wrong/challenges, and the believe that graduate school opens doors. The themes about the barriers faced by the participants that will be discussed in this chapter include feelings of loneliness, shame/stigma, and mental health. The themes will also incorporate connections to one of the three grounding theories when applicable.

Traits that contributed to academic success.

Confidence in self/self-drive. One of the most common findings from the data was that all six of the participants in the study had an element of confidence in themselves or self-drive, this was mentioned nine times throughout the participants' interviews. The participants described their confidence by sharing situations in which they knew that regardless of the challenges they experienced, they would overcome these. Some of the participants were able to identify themselves as confident, while others believed they had some self-drive even if there was an element of doubt. The self-drive for some of the participants was identified when they stated that quitting was not an option for them, even when graduate school became very difficult. This trait of self- confidence and self- drive was impactful to the success of the individuals as it kept them going even when they felt like giving up. Alicia shared that self-confidence was built in her by her mentor who continuously told her she had what it took to become a part of the 1% of foster youth who receive a degree. For Marianna, the self-drive came from a need to prove to herself that she was smart and capable, of completing graduate school. For some of these participants, it was a sense of purpose that influenced their self-drive, whether it was a purpose to make a

mentor proud or a purpose to provide their own children with a better life. Purpose was connected to drive, self-drive may be an important factor in academic success that schools, educators, and systems should consider.

Having confidence in once self or having self-drive is aligned to Self-efficacy, one of the grounding theories of this study. Bandura (1986) defined self-efficacy as an individual's judgments of their capabilities to execute and organize courses of action required to attain certain types of performances. Most of the participants in the study had high expectations of themselves when they began graduate school. These participants knew that graduate school would not be an easy process; however, there was an element of belief in themselves that they could achieve success. Even if there was an element of doubt within the participant, there were a few individuals in their lives that believed in them, even when the participants were unable to believe in themselves. One of the studies in the literature on self-efficacy revealed that parental involvement leads to higher self-efficacy in students (Bondy et al., 2017).

Although the participants in the study did not necessarily have the involvement of their biological families, they did have a community of supporters. Community supporters were fundamental to the academic success of the participants in the study, which reiterates the importance of having supportive relationships throughout one's journey.

Resourceful/asking for help. Another trait of the participants as deemed by the researcher based on the interview responses was being resourceful. Six out of the six participants were deemed as resourceful or having the ability to ask for help, the frequency of this theme was highlighted fifteen times throughout the participants' interviews. Marianna, Jordan, and Alicia described their ability to be resourceful when they realized academic areas where they were not as efficient, and they purposefully sought out individuals who had the skills to assist them.

Marianna and Olivia also shared situations in which they communicated with their professors and asked for extensions on assignments. Alicia spoke about her experience of applying to an Ivy League school, and how she was on the phone with a staff member of the admissions office for the Ivy League school until the moment she pressed the submit button. Thomas shared his experience with homelessness with one of his graduate school professors right as he was ready to give up and leave his graduate program. His professor immediately mobilized her colleagues and leaders of the graduate school program. Ultimately, Thomas was able to get his tuition fee waived for the semester and he was also able to obtain housing through the graduate program. Had he not communicated with his professor, it is unlikely that he would have been able to complete his master's program.

Olivia was able to utilize the support services for students with disabilities on her campus. By using these support services, she was able to receive additional assistance such as extended time on exams, and the ability to use notes. Having these resources allowed her graduate school journey to be less arduous. All of the participants identified a few people whom they were able to reach out to and ask for help throughout their graduate school journey. The experiences encountered by the participants highlight the importance of incorporating trainings for education staff on communicating with students about resources, or trainings for students on accessing resources and/or on communicating struggles as part of their general coursework.

There are two important factors to highlight when thinking of the participants as being resourceful, the first is the courage that it took for them to be able to ask for help, and the second is the responses of the individuals they reached out to. In most cases, the participants were able to receive the support they needed. Marianna shared her experience when she reached out to a professor and the professor appeared frustrated. Marianna was determined not to ask for

assistance from that professor again, and instead reached out to others. This trait of being resourceful connects to the theory of resilience, which is one of the grounding theories for this study. More specifically, connecting to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory (described in Chapter Two). Bronfenbrenner communicates that in order to really understand someone, we must also consider their environment, the individuals whom he or she interacts with, and the climate of the greater society as a whole. The study participants were able to connect with others who were able to help them in areas where they needed extra support. The participants were also able to connect to resources that would assist them in their graduate school journey.

External factors that contributed to academic success.

Mentors. One of the primary factors that contributed to the academic success of former foster youth who participated in the study was the involvement of a mentor in their lives. Five out of the six participants identified someone in their lives who served as a mentor and was important in the participants' pursuits of a graduate degree. The mentors showed up at different times in the participants' lives, for some they showed up while in the early days of care, for others towards the end of high school, and for others it was through their college years that they connected with a mentor. Olivia highlighted the important role her mentor played in being able to have difficult conversations with her, conversations that would have typically been led by a parent. The mentors also played an important role in introducing and exposing the participants to new experiences. The participants' mentors were also the individuals who believed in the participants being able to complete graduate school. Having a mentor connects to resilience, which is one of the grounding theories of this study. The literature on resilience emphasized the importance of supportive relationships as one of the most common elements to contribute to

resilience (Drapeau et al., 2007; Hass et al., 2014; Jackson & Martin, 1998; Jones, 2010; Morales, 2008; Perez et al., 2009; Piel et al., 2017; Samuels & Pryce, 2008). The data from this study supports the literature as the participants of this study expressed numerous times the importance of their mentors to and through their graduate school journey. Further emphasizing the importance of schools investing into programs that encourage mentoring and supportive relationships for students, especially for the more vulnerable populations of students.

Community. An additional factor that contributed to the academic success of former foster youth who participated in the study was the support of their community. Although this finding was not as common as the ones previously mentioned, it is important to highlight, because it brings to light the importance of multiple supportive relationships. Olivia shared her experience of getting into an undergraduate program immediately after high school. The program was far away from her community, and because she did not have relationships in her new community, she ended up dropping out. Olivia shared, that it was not until she returned to her county of origin and began to develop and establish a community of support, that she was able to become successful. Jordan also highlighted the importance of having community, and actually attributed the presence or lack of community, to a person either being successful or failing in graduate school, he stated, “It’s about the community around that person that I think can make or break a person.” Throughout the interviews, participants were able to identify the impact of the support of different people at different times of their lives. Alicia shared the impact her mentor had on her, when she met him; she was only 12 years old. Unfortunately, her mentor passed away, and as she was sharing her story, she identified other individuals who helped her in her journey including a professor who encouraged her to apply to one of the most prestigious Universities in the country, an admissions staff member who held her hand through the entire

admissions process, a significant other who encouraged her while she drove 80 miles a day in Los Angeles traffic, and her mentors family, who financially supported her second master's program. Thomas spoke about his social worker who encouraged him to apply to law school when he was nineteen, he also spoke about a professor who mobilized her colleagues and leadership to assist the student when he revealed barriers with homelessness, later he spoke about an elected official who offered him employment when he was unable to find a job. Similar to the factor of having a mentor, the impact of community also falls under resilience which highlights the importance of supportive relationships (Drapeau et al., 2007; Hass et al., 2014; Jackson & Martin, 1998; Jones, 2010; Morales, 2008; Perez et al., 2009; Piel et al., 2017; Samuels & Pryce, 2008). There is an African proverb that says it takes a village to raise a child, the proverb is certainly true for the individuals who participated in this study. It would seem that as campuses invest in their culture of community, vulnerable, socially displaced students in particular would benefit.

Proving others wrong. An additional factor that was commonly shared amongst five of the six participants was the desire to prove others wrong. This external factor had a frequency of seven within the interviews. Although the factors identified above emphasized the importance of having supportive relationships, this factor highlights some of the challenges brought upon by certain individuals involved in the participants' lives. The reason it is placed under external factors that contributed to the graduate success of participants in the study, is because thanks to the challenges presented, the participants in the study were able to turn a negative situation and use it as a fuel to fire their success. Marianna shared about her challenges with her research methods professor, the participant became so discouraged by the responses from her professor, that she opted to look for support elsewhere. Marianna was determined to prove to her professor

that she could be successful in the course and she would accomplish this without her support. Thanks to the fire that was fueled with in, the participant completed her research methods course. Olivia also shared a desire to prove someone wrong, in this case it was her mom who would inculcate negative prophecies about her life. Olivia further stated that it's not that she necessarily envisioned herself as a successful person, however her desire to prove her mother wrong was stronger than anything else. While the participants in this study were able to take a negative experience and use it as fuel for something positive, the experience itself still had an effect on the participants. Furthermore, it is important to note that not all individuals respond the same way to the messages that they hear from those around them. There may be individuals who hear negative messages about their lives and grow up to live to those negative expectations. Therefore, it is important for educators at all levels to challenge their students in a manner that is supportive and respectful of the student.

Graduate degrees open doors. The final factor that will be discussed in this section as it relates to contributing to the academic success of former foster youth is the belief that graduate school allows for greater opportunity. Four out of the six participants in the study spoke about the impact that a graduate degree has had on their lives. The participants highlighted some of the personal impacts of a graduate degree, which included an elevated sense of confidence and being able to break historic familial dysfunctions. In addition to the personal impacts, the participants also described some of the professional impacts that were manifested thanks to their graduate degree. Marianna shared that thanks to her graduate degree she feels she is more respected by her colleagues. Olivia shared that one of the greatest impacts of a graduate degree was the fact that she feels confident enough to be able to find employment should she ever be in a situation where she is dismissed from her job or she wants to walk away. The participants described an element

of empowerment that was brought upon because of their graduate degree. Additionally, the participants spoke about the financial benefits that surfaced with their graduate degree, the benefits were not solely in terms of salary, but also in being able to have medical insurance or save for retirement. The elements described in this section were significant to the participants as many of them grew up in impoverished neighborhoods where saving for retirement or having medical insurance were luxuries that were far from their realities.

Barriers encountered by the participants.

Shame/stigma. One of the most significant barriers for the participants in this study was the shame/stigma they encountered because of their experience in foster care. All six participants spoke about the issue, some of them referred to the effects it had while they were in placement and others highlighted how it still impacts their adult lives. Marianna shared what it was like for her to walk into a market or any other public location with a staff and other girls who looked nothing like her, she could feel the stigma in the way others stared at the group. Alicia shared her experience with stigma while she was in community college; the participant explained that due to the lack of academic rigor while she was in care, she was not able to develop the foundation necessary to succeed in college. She had to repeat college courses multiple times, she felt the shame from the professors some of whose courses she had to take up to 10 times. Thomas emphasized how the fear he felt as a child, fear of being abused, transformed into a fear of others perceiving him differently if they found out about his foster care background. More specifically, Thomas wondered if others would still perceive him as professional if they knew of his experience. Jordan also highlighted a similar fear, a fear of being judged by others for being placed in a situation that he didn't ask to be in. Jordan said he was "deathly afraid" of people finding out about his foster care status and judging him on that.

As the researcher of the study, it is interesting to see the connection between the number of participants who felt shame/stigma (six out of six) and how many participants chose not to speak about their foster care experience while they were going through graduate school (four out of six). The most common response for why the participants chose not to speak about their foster care experience was because they did not want to be treated differently. At some point these participants received differential treatment because of their foster care status, and as adults when they regained a sense of control, they purposefully chose not to speak about that experience. This barrier is connected to identity development, which is one of the grounding theories of the study. More specifically it relates to Cooley's (1922) looking glass self theory, where Cooley found that individuals form their identities based on how others perceived them and interact with them. If the participants in the study, believed that because of their foster care status they were at some point seen or treated as if they were "too damaged" or "not up to par" or "juvenile delinquents" and if Cooley's looking glass self theory is correct, then it would make sense that the shame and stigma they felt as children still has an impact on them as adults, and why they would choose to keep that part of their life a secret. Educators at all levels will come across students, some of whom they will never know anything about, which is the reason why educators should be supportive of their students, even when they have no knowledge of the battle's students face every day.

Loneliness. An additional barrier encountered by some of the participants in the study was feelings of loneliness. Although only half of the participants share their experience with loneliness, the impacts of this were significant to individual participant's stories. Marianna shared feelings of loneliness while she was placed in care, although she was surrounded by support, she still felt lonely and isolated. She expressed that even though living with her

biological family was not healthy or safe, she still felt like she was a part of somebody's unit. Thomas and Olivia also disclosed their experience with feelings of loneliness, it is important to highlight that for both of these participants feeling lonely was so impactful, that it led them to leave their academic programs. Thomas shared how shocking it was for him to go from living in a group home, to living on his own. He shared that going from one extreme to the other led him to severe depression. Thomas ultimately decided to abandon the law school. Olivia shared her experience with being able to transfer from foster care into a 4-year university that was away from her county of origin. While she was away at the university she described feeling alone, and she shared that she had no support network or financial stability, all of which led her to quit her program. Olivia further shared that it wasn't until she returned to her county of origin and she began to build a community of support for herself that she was able to become successful.

The difficult experiences identified by the participants of feeling isolated or lonely are related to identity development. Literature on identify development informs us that negative life experiences can have a negative impact on how individuals develop their own identity (Daughtery, 2012; Kaufman & Johnson, 2004; Kools, 1997, 1999; Matthews et al., 2014; McMurray et al., 2011; Mulkerns & Owen, 2008; Oakes, 2011; Strauser et al., 2006; Unoka & Vizin, 2017). For some of the participants, the feelings were so extreme it impacted their mental health and well-being. Feelings of loneliness can be painful for the individual experiencing these, this is why it is important for students to have someone they can turn to in assisting them in overcoming the difficult feelings. Campuses of all grade levels can support students who encounter these feelings by creating availability in the schedule of school counselors' and also by establishing peer support groups. As we have heard from some of the participants of this study, peer groups have the potential to be helpful.

Mental health. The final barrier that will be covered under key findings is the impact of mental health; five out of the six participants in the study shared their experience with this. Findings in the literature revealed that for students who experienced the foster care system, mental health issues could follow them from K-12 all the way to graduate school (Hallet et al., 2018; Huang et al., 2018) Some of the participants experience mental health barriers directly, while others were impacted by mental health challenges encountered by their biological family members. The participants who faced mental health challenges encountered these at different times in their lives. Alicia battled depression so severely that it led her to multiple suicide attempts as a child. Marianna shared that during her graduate school program she struggled with panic attacks and depression. Jordan spoke about feelings of anxiety and disclosed that although he never attempted suicide, thoughts of suicide would invade his mind. Thomas struggled with depression so severely; it inhibited him from being able to function in his everyday life. In addition to immediate mental health barriers encountered by the participants in the study, some of them also had to overcome the challenges that emerged due to their mothers' challenges with mental health. For at least three of the participants, their mothers' battles with mental health contributed to the participants being placed into foster care. Encountering mental health issues can be stigmatizing in and of itself, which has a huge impact on identity development due to the way others perceive and interact with individuals who struggle with mental health. Because of this, it is important for individuals who encounter mental health or other stigmas to receive professional help and overcome the feelings indicted by these. School campuses at all levels could support students battling with these issues by encouraging students to access supports available on or off campus.

Conclusions

Three conclusions were drawn based on an analysis and interpretation of the data collected and presented in this study.

Conclusion 1. The first conclusion of this study is that for this group, the impact of community support was essential to the success of their journey to and through graduate school. In this study, community support refers to multiple individuals who assisted the study participants at different times in their lives and elevated them towards graduate school. The literature on the factors that contribute to the academic success of foster youth at both the K-12 and undergraduate levels specify the importance of a mentor or a permanent positive connection (Batsche et al., 2014; Bruster & Coccoma, 2013; Cox, 2012; Crawford et al., 2011; Day et al., 2011, 2012; Hass et al., 2014; Kirk & Day, 2011; Lawler et al., 2014; Merdinger et al., 2005; Morton, 2015; Pecora et al., 2006; Shin, 2003; Weinberg et al., 2014). This study supports the literature and adds to it by outlining the power of community support or multiple mentors. Repeatedly, the participants in the study highlighted different individuals at different times in their lives who made their journey less painful by their words or actions. Marianna shared about a teacher who in addition to focusing on her academics also took the time to teach her about becoming a young woman; more specifically Marianna highlighted her approach of being friendly and non-judgmental. Further in her journey, Mariana highlighted her mentor, but she also highlighted a professor and her supervisors' wife as individuals who contributed to her success in graduate school. Jordan also highlighted different individuals who supported his journey to and through graduate school and in his advice to former foster youth who may also be considering a graduate program he stated, "for a foster youth or former youth that's assuming that they want to go, building community and finding the best opportunity for them to maximize

their talents.” The literature shows that having a mentor or a permanent positive connection is crucial for youth with experience in foster care to be successful in their education at the k-12 or undergraduate levels. For the participants in this study, in addition to having a mentor, having a community of supporters contributed to their journey to and through graduate school.

Conclusion 2. A second conclusion of this study is that the experience of foster care has lasting impacts through adulthood on the individuals who were involved in it. Even after reaching some of the highest levels of academia the stigma does not disappear, individuals may benefit from continuing their supports and relationships. Findings in the literature inform us that experiences of trauma shame/stigma can have a negative impact on how individuals develop their identity of themselves (Daughtery, 2012; Kaufman & Johnson, 2004; Kools, 1997, 1999; Matthews et al., 2014; McMurray et al., 2011; Mulkerns & Owen, 2008; Oakes, 2011; Strauser et al., 2006; Unoka & Vizin, 2017). Specifically for those who have experienced the foster care system, the literature informs us that being removed from one’s home can be traumatic in and of itself and being placed into care can also be shameful and stigmatizing (Clemens et al., 2017; Farmer et al., 2013; Michelle, 2015; Salazar et al., 2016). This study supports the literature and adds to it by emphasizing the impact of the foster care system on individuals who experienced it and are now adults with professional degrees. Specifically, for the males who participated in the study the impacts were so significant, that all three of them described how even years later, they are still overcoming the repercussions of it. Carl described these feelings best when he shared the following words: “While I achieved surviving the chaos that surrounded my life, the toll it took on my self-confidence and sense of self as a construct still affect me to this day.”

Conclusion 3. The circumstances that impacted the educational experience of the participants and made their needs unique and challenging in comparison to other students in the

school system, are school mobility/instability, dealing with multiple systems, and navigating the shame and trauma. Given the unique experience of being removed from their homes, foster youth face many challenges that other students who are not in foster care do not have to deal with. Some of these challenges include, the impact of school mobility and stability (Connell et al., 2006; Hudson-Plush, 2006; Kirk & Day, 2011; Pecora et al., 2005) Thomas experienced school mobility as he attended four different middle schools and three different high schools. In addition to mobility and instability, students in care also have the unique challenge of dealing with multiple systems. One of the greatest challenges of dealing with multiple systems is that often times, the systems do not have functioning collaborations with one another (Clemens et al., 2017; Cox, 2012; Ferguson & Wolkow, 2012; Kirk, & Day, 2011; McMillen et al., 2003; Morton, 2015; Wulczyn et al., 2009; Zetlin et al., 2006, 2012). Alicia experienced this challenge as she had to navigate the Mental Health System, the Child Welfare System, and the Education System. The final unique challenge encountered by the participants was the impacts of shame and stigma (Clemens et al., 2017; Farmer et al., 2013; Michelle, 2015; Salazar et al., 2016). Jordan experienced this when he shared how embarrassing it would be if anyone found out he did not live with his mom and dad. Education institutions have an opportunity to strengthen the way they serve foster students. It is the unique vulnerability, and sensitivity of foster students that shine the light on areas that need more attention for all students. This study supports the literature that students in foster care have unique needs.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of former foster youth who have completed graduate level academic programs, in order to discover and describe the elements that these individuals believe led to their academic success. Findings of this study can

inform professionals in the fields of child welfare and education (K-12 and beyond) about how to support students with involvement in foster care or students who have experienced other traumas. Based on the findings of this study, the researcher recommends the following:

1. For education institutions to create a space and opportunity for all students, but particularly those students who are most academically vulnerable so that they may feel safe, welcome, and a sense of belonging.
 - a. In creating a sense of belonging and feeling welcome, professionals in the field must be mindful of the implicit and explicit biases they carry, and how these reveal themselves in their interactions with the students and families they serve. Due to the explicit but specifically because of the implicit biases individuals carry, because of their human nature, management should allow for time and space for their employees to address these. A training on serving students and families in a cultural proficient manner would lead the journey through this process. Management in education institutions at all levels and child and family serving agencies would also benefit from incorporating reflective supervision practices across all staff levels, but specially with those staff members who serve children and families at the front lines.
 - b. In creating a sense of belonging (for K-12) this recommendation would require a staff member in each school that is knowledgeable and experienced in working with children who have experienced trauma. Although AB 490 spells out that all school districts must have a foster youth liaison, the law needs to be carried out more responsibly by hiring someone to solely focus on the education of foster youth, rather than simply adding the title of “foster youth liaison” to staff

members who already have too much on their plate. The number of foster youths served by the district should determine whether this individual serves foster children per school or for the entire district.

- i. This person would validate the experience of students and also teach them how to reframe the responses to their experience as something that has contributed to who they are because of what they prevailed.
 - ii. This person would also be the hub of the education of foster youth and ensure that information is being transferred across all systems touching the child and family, which may include probation, mental health, and child welfare amongst others, in addition to education.
 - c. In following the continuum of care in the education system and creating a sense of feeling welcome and belonging this recommendation requires an actual physical space. Specifically, for high school and college age students who were associated with the child welfare system or faced homelessness. In this space, these students can obtain supports that will make them successful in their academic journey.
 - i. Book loaning until financial aid comes in for students.
 - ii. Printing
 - iii. Access to resources to address their basic needs (food and shelter) or mental health needs
 - iv. Developing peer relationships with others who have encountered similar struggles as them.
2. A second recommendation would include professional learning for all teachers and other education staff, seasoned and new, at all levels K-12 and beyond. In addition to

professional learning for staff who are already in the field, for all undergraduate programs across the country to incorporate courses that inform future educators and other school personnel about the impacts of trauma. These programs should include the following

- a. What are some of the traumas encountered by today's students?
- b. How do these traumas manifest in the classroom?
- c. Strategies on how to best support students who face these challenges.

We have an opportunity to better prepare the future workforce of educators so that they may serve the students of tomorrow in ways that are culturally proficient and respectful of their experiences.

3. For child serving agencies such as child welfare, mental health, probation, education and nongovernmental organization to meet regularly, look beyond their individual agency needs, and work together for the success of the children and families involved in the child welfare system. This is important because a community is only as well as the relationships between its parts. This recommendation requires two practices.
 - a. Specifically, for K-12 and community college this recommendation is for social service agency directors/deputy directors to have monthly or quarterly strategizing meetings with district superintendents and deans of student services on how to improve student outcomes for foster children. Moreover, ensuring that there are systems and supports in place to facilitate the journey of foster students from high school to secondary education.
 - i. Meeting topics could include how to diminish school mobility for foster youth.

- ii. Ensuring that students in foster care are receiving the appropriate trauma therapy in a setting that is most helpful to the students.
 - iii. Increase opportunities for students to develop their writing and math in ways that are meaningful.
 - iv. Ensuring students are meeting the requirements to go to college.
 - b. The second practice for this recommendation would be a roll call meeting that would take place between a child welfare representative and the education foster youth liaison and discuss the academic progress of all foster students within a district. In addition to the progress, the gaps would also be discussed along with tangibles on how to bridge the gap, for example tutoring.
- 4. For higher education institutions to utilize modern technology and develop virtual supports for students who may not have the luxury to solely be students. In addition, for professors to be available to support students during non-regular business hours. These supports would benefit students who are working full time and do not have the ability to go to main campuses to access supports.
 - a. Virtual supports may include video tutorials on various subjects.
 - b. Virtual supports may also require professors to flex their time and be available after hours or on weekend to meet with students via Skype or other forms of modern technology.
- 5. For child welfare agencies to have an education team which would consists of social workers who are solely responsible for ensuring the academic success of foster students.
 - a. These social workers would maintain the relationship with education institutions and could assist in keeping the lines of communication open, and provide foster

youth with information on higher education. Including information about scholarships and programs available to them in college.

- b. These social workers would also ensure that education institutions have the most up to-date information of students in care.
 - c. Lastly, this team of social workers would assist students in successfully making the transition from K-12 to higher education.
6. The final recommendation is for policy makers in California to consider the unique needs of foster youth who are in higher education and to pass legislative and budgetary measures that would allow former foster youth to be successful in higher education.
- a. Access to year-round housing as long as the individual is enrolled as a student.
 - b. Loaned books so that students can hit the ground running on the first day of school.
 - c. Requiring higher education institutions to disclose general student outcomes for students who came through the foster care system as a way of holding the institutions accountable.

Recommendations for Further Study

There are five recommendations for future research that grew based on the findings of this study. The first of these is a recommendation to duplicate this study. Given that, there are so many barriers for foster students to even graduate from high school and succeed in undergraduate programs it would be beneficial to consider the lived experiences of additional former foster youth who obtained graduate level degrees. This would allow administrators and policy makers to look at the similarities and differences, if any, and make changes to practices and policies to contribute to the success of students coming out of foster care.

A second recommendation would be a comparison study that explores the impact of race and ethnicity of foster students who obtained graduate level degrees. Based on the demographics of the participants in the study, one identified as Hispanic, and one identified as African American, three of the participants identified as either white or Caucasian and one identified as Caucasian/Native American. The AFCARS 2017 identified that there was a total of 442, 995 children placed into the foster care system, 44% of these students were white, 23% were Black or African American, and 21% were Hispanic. These statistics inform us that there is still an over representation of people of color in the child welfare system and an underrepresentation in graduate schools (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017).

A third recommendation for future studies includes a comparative study with former foster youth who enrolled into a graduate program but did not have the opportunity to complete it. This study highlights the factors that contributed to the academic success of former foster youth in graduate programs. It would be beneficial to better understand the barriers that have inhibited former foster students from completing a graduate degree so that practices to remove those barriers can be implemented.

A fourth recommendation would be to further explore and understand the professional experience of individuals who were served by the system and are now serving the system. More specifically, it would be interesting to learn about the roles and responsibilities they have in their professional careers. Furthermore, it would be helpful to know if their lived experience with the child welfare system has aided or inhibited their opportunity to advance in their careers.

A fifth recommendation for further studies would be to compare the experiences (academically and professionally) of those individuals who took opportunities to disclose their foster care experience publicly versus those who elected not to share about their experiences.

Some of the participants in the study were very open about their foster care experience, while others were more protective about who they disclosed the information too. As future generations of students continue to be involved in the child welfare system, it would be helpful for service providers to understand the benefits and repercussions placed on students who are invited to speak about their experience in different youth panels.

A sixth recommendation for research would be to explore practices and coordination amongst multiple child serving agencies. Given the findings of the study and the findings of the literature concerning the barriers that are presented when multiple agencies are involved.

Final Thoughts

Like the canary in the coal mine identifying dangers, students in the foster care system are able to identify the gaps in the education system, therefore making it better for all students. This study outlines the various gaps in the education system specific to students in foster care, but as Dr. Jaiya John so beautifully stated, it is my believe that if these gaps can be address for foster students, the education system will become better for all students.

The process of conducting this research study has been a very personal given my own lived experience with the child welfare system and also as a professional who has worked at the intersection and child welfare and education for the last fourteen years. My hopes in developing this manuscript was to honor and to share the unique stories of students who experienced the foster care system and later attained some of the highest levels of education. In addition to telling the story, my intent was to shine a light on the elements that contributed to their academic success, in efforts to learn about and incorporate practices in the various child-serving systems so that more children can attain educational success. My intent was also to bring to light some of the struggles in the student's journey so that as a society we can do what is in our power to

facilitate the journey of others who are coming through the child welfare system. I hope that as people with diverse backgrounds and careers are able to read through the pages of this manuscript, they will become inspired by the stories of tenacity and resilience and moved to make decisions to benefit of some of our nation's most vulnerable children and families.

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APPENDIX A

Demographic Questionnaire

1. What age were you when you entered foster care?
2. At what age did you exit foster care?
3. Gender?
4. Duration in foster care?
5. How would you define your ethnicity or race?
6. Type of Foster care setting? Name all that apply.
 - a. Group home
 - b. Foster home
 - c. Treatment foster care
 - d. Living with a relative
 - e. Non family relative
 - f. Juvenile Hall
 - g. Shelter Home
 - h. Residential
 - i. Other (please explain)
7. What graduate program did you complete?

APPENDIX B

Participant Interview Guide

Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in this study, I think it's important to highlight the hope that your story brings to others who are currently placed in foster care or trying to help out individuals who are placed in care. As you know I am trying to get a better understanding of how someone with such a challenging experience, manages to reach some of the highest levels of academia. If it's ok with you, I would like to start off by asking you some questions about your foster care experience:

1. Could you share with me about your educational experience while in foster care?
2. What were your own beliefs of your academic abilities while in foster care?
3. Did you feel stigmatized by having been in foster care? If so, how did this impact your education in K-12 and early college (undergraduate)
4. What were your dreams and academic goals before entering foster care? Did you believe you could achieve them? What were your dreams and academic goals after leaving foster care?

Thank you for answering those questions, now I would like to hear more about your graduate level experience:

1. At what point in your life did you decide to pursue a graduate level degree? And what motivated you to do so?
2. What were your expectations of yourself when you decided to apply to a graduate program?
3. Tell me about your graduate School Experience, Where did you go? What were some of the highlights?
4. Is there any experience or event you can pinpoint that led to a realization of your academic potential?
5. Please share any experiences you had with graduate faculty having low or high expectations of you. Were these faculty aware of your foster care experience?
6. Throughout your process of obtaining a graduate degree, did you have any doubt in your mind that you could complete your program? If so, how did you manage to overcome that?
7. What elements have contributed to your graduate school success?
8. What challenges did you face in completing graduate school? And what did you do to overcome these challenges
9. Who believed in your ability to complete graduate school?
10. How did obtaining a graduate degree impact you (Personally and Professionally)? If at all?
11. What advice would you have for a young person formerly in foster care who may be considering applying to graduate school?

APPENDIX C

Participant Recruitment Letter

Dear _____,

My name is Cristina Miranda, and I am a doctoral student in the Graduate School of Education and Psychology at Pepperdine University. I am conducting a research study to explore the lived experiences of individuals who spent time in foster care and also managed to obtain a graduate level degree and you are invited to participate in the study. If you agree, I am interested in interviewing you about your personal experiences with foster care and completing a graduate degree.

The interview is anticipated to take no more than 60 minutes of your time and will be recorded and transcribed, with your permission. Participation in this study is voluntary and your identity as a participant will remain confidential both during and after the study. Your personal privacy, and the privacy of your workplace, will be protected through the use of pseudonyms.

Please be ensured that there will be no negative repercussions should you choose not to participate. If you have questions or would like to participate, please contact me at [REDACTED] or via email at [REDACTED]

I appreciate your consideration and look forward to speaking with you.

Sincerely,

Cristina Miranda

Pepperdine University Graduate School of Education and Psychology Doctoral Candidate

APPENDIX D

Letter of Informed Consent



IRB Number # 19-03-1015

Study Title:

Exploring the lived experiences of foster youth who obtained graduate level degrees: Self Efficacy, Resilience and the impact on identity formation

Invitation

Dear [name],

My name is Cristina Miranda. I am conducting a study on the lived experiences of foster youth who obtained graduate level degrees, I am particularly interested in the self-efficacy, resilience, and identity formation. If you are 22 years of age or older, were placed into the foster care system, and now hold a graduate level degree you may participate in this research.

What is the reason for doing this research study?

This is a research project that focuses on the lived experiences of former foster youth who have completed graduate level academic programs. In order to participate you must be between the ages of 22 and 60 you must have been placed into the foster care system, and now hold a graduate level degree. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore the lived experiences of former foster youth who have completed graduate level academic programs in order to discover and describe the elements that these individuals believe led to their academic success. For the purposes of this study, academic success will refer to the completion of a graduate level program. In order to participate you must be 19 years of age or older and must have spent some time in the foster care system and have obtained a graduate level degree.

What will be done during this research study?

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in an anticipated 60 minute interview with Cristina Miranda. During your participation in this study, you will be asked 15 interview questions that relate to your experiences around foster care and your graduate level experience. More specifically the questions address (1) Self-efficacy, (2) Resilience, (3) and the impact on Identity development.

The interview will be audio-recorded and transcribed by Cristina Miranda. If you chose not to be recorded, the researcher will ask to take written notes. The interviews will be conducted at a location that is convenient to you, whenever possible. In situations where it is not feasible to conduct face to face interviews, it is proposed that modern technology such as Skype, Adobe

Connect, or Facetime be utilized.

What are the possible risks of being in this research study?

Choosing to participate in this study has minimal risks, however some of the potential risks include discomfort in recalling of difficult experiences during their college years and years in foster care. Participants may also experience some level of mental exhaustion or loss of time for the length of the interview session. In efforts to ameliorate the risks identified, breaks may be offered during the interview process if necessary, additionally, the researcher will reiterate before the interview that their participation in the study is voluntary and that they may refuse to answer any question if it feels uncomfortable or choose to stop the interview at any moment. A social risk may be if identifiable information is not adequately protected, and if the participant feels an element of shame to their foster care experience and has not shared their foster care experience with others.

What are the possible benefits to you?

While there are no direct benefits to the study participants, there are anticipated benefits to society which include: A new contribution to the field in regard to the experiences of individuals who obtained post graduate degrees and emancipated from the foster care system, currently of which there is very limited information. Additional potential benefits include a better understanding of what contributes to the academic success of at risk populations and knowledge about how educators can lead at risk students to academic success. Lastly, a deeper understanding of the relationship between identity development, self-efficacy and resilience in former foster youth.

How will information about you be protected?

The data collected from the interviews will be stored on a password protected computer in the principal investigators home. The data will be stored for a minimum of three years. The data collected will be de- identified by removing you name and coding it with a pseudonym. The principal investigator will transcribed the interviews and will be the only one who has access to the master list of pseudonyms. You will have the opportunity to review transcripts for accuracy. The data will be stored on a password protected computer in the researcher’s office for no less than three years after the study has been completed and will be permanently destroyed after.

What are your rights as a research subject?

You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in or during the study.

For study related questions, please contact the investigator(s): Cristina Miranda at [REDACTED] or via email at [REDACTED] or Dr. Linda Purrington at [REDACTED] or via email at [REDACTED]

For questions concerning your rights or complaints about the research contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB):

- Phone: [REDACTED]
- Email: [REDACTED]

What will happen if you decide not to be in this research study or decide to stop participating once you start?

Your participation in the study is voluntary. You can decide not to be in this research study, or you can stop being in this research study (“withdraw”) at any time before, during, or after the research begins for any reason. Deciding not to be in this research study or deciding to withdraw will not affect your relationship with the investigator or with Pepperdine University. You will not lose any benefits to which you are entitled.

Documentation of Informed Consent

You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. By completing and submitting your survey responses, you have given your consent to participate in this research. You should print a copy of this page for your records.

APPENDIX E

Interview Protocol Script

Thank you again for participating in this interview.

I am conducting a research study to explore the lived experiences of individuals who spent time in foster care and also managed to obtain a graduate level degree. You've been invited to participate in the study because you meet the criteria. The findings of this study will be published, as they may provide the educational community with further insight regarding serving foster youth in an academic capacity.

This interview should last no more than an hour. You will be asked fifteen in-depth questions about your experience with a focus on self-efficacy, resilience, and identity development. With your permission, I will be audio-recording the interview and I will transcribe these at a later time. Once I have completed the transcriptions I will forward them to you so you can check them for accuracy.

As a reminder, your participation is completely voluntary. You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty.

Do you have any questions you'd like to ask before the interview begins?

APPENDIX F

IRB Approval Letter for Human Research



Pepperdine University
24255 Pacific Coast Highway
Malibu, CA 90263
TEL: 310-506-4000

NOTICE OF APPROVAL FOR HUMAN RESEARCH

Date: May 09, 2019

Protocol Investigator Name: Cristina Miranda

Protocol #: 19-03-1015

Project Title: Exploring the Lived Experiences of Foster Youth who Obtained Graduate Level Degrees: Self Efficacy, Resilience, and the Impact on Identity Development

School: Graduate School of Education and Psychology

Dear Cristina Miranda:

Thank you for submitting your application for exempt review to Pepperdine University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). We appreciate the work you have done on your proposal. The IRB has reviewed your submitted IRB application and all ancillary materials. Upon review, the IRB has determined that the above entitled project meets the requirements for exemption under the federal regulations 45 CFR 46.101 that govern the protections of human subjects.

Your research must be conducted according to the proposal that was submitted to the IRB. If changes to the approved protocol occur, a revised protocol must be reviewed and approved by the IRB before implementation. For any proposed changes in your research protocol, please submit an amendment to the IRB. Since your study falls under exemption, there is no requirement for continuing IRB review of your project. Please be aware that changes to your protocol may prevent the research from qualifying for exemption from 45 CFR 46.101 and require submission of a new IRB application or other materials to the IRB.

A goal of the IRB is to prevent negative occurrences during any research study. However, despite the best intent, unforeseen circumstances or events may arise during the research. If an unexpected situation or adverse event happens during your investigation, please notify the IRB as soon as possible. We will ask for a complete written explanation of the event and your written response. Other actions also may be required depending on the nature of the event. Details regarding the timeframe in which adverse events must be reported to the IRB and documenting the adverse event can be found in the *Pepperdine University Protection of Human Participants in Research: Policies and Procedures Manual* at community.pepperdine.edu/irb.

Please refer to the protocol number denoted above in all communication or correspondence related to your application and this approval. Should you have additional questions or require clarification of the contents of this letter, please contact the IRB Office. On behalf of the IRB, I wish you success in this scholarly pursuit.

Sincerely,

Judy Ho, Ph.D., IRB Chair

cc: Mrs. Katy Carr, Assistant Provost for Research

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