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## THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE OF CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE

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THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE OF CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE

By

AUTUMN M. BRUECKMANN

A doctoral dissertation submitted to the  
College of Education  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree Doctor of Education  
in Curriculum and Instruction

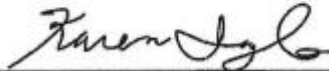
Southeastern University  
March, 2023

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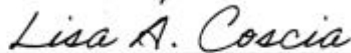
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## DEDICATION

Thank you to my supportive family for providing me the time to commit to this work, particularly to my devoted husband, Joseph, and my five beautiful children. Thank you to my fellow foster parents for their dedication to the children in need. I am grateful to have had the support of my extended family and friends throughout this process.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## ABSTRACT

Children in foster care face a myriad of challenges in educational development. Conducting a phenomenological study, the researcher interviewed eight foster parents licensed in the state of Florida regarding the educational experiences of children in foster care. From the holistic perspective the data set provided, the researcher described the educational experience of children in foster care using the five themes: challenges, meeting needs, deficiencies, support systems, and behaviors of foster parents. Though children in foster care face many challenges, community members such as foster parents and case managers work to meet the needs of children in care. However, because of the deficiencies in the system, not every need is met. Providing support to foster parents enables a greater number of needs to be met. Important behaviors of foster parents include advocacy and self-education. A greater level of wrap-around support for foster parents is necessary to adequately address the needs of children in foster care.

*Keywords:* foster care, foster parent, elementary foster student support, foster children education



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## I. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the educational experiences among elementary-aged children in foster care in Florida through the perspectives of their foster parents. Today, in the state of Florida, approximately 19,000 children are currently in foster care (Adoption Exchange Association, n.d.). These children, through no fault of their own, face conflict, confusion, and challenge (Morton, 2017; Wells, 2006). Family involvement significantly influences a child's education, and children in foster care rely upon foster families to aid them in educational pursuits (Wells, 2006). Foster families may not feel equipped to meet the various needs presented by the children in care or may not know how to navigate special education (Wells, 2006). Foster parents cannot meet the needs alone (Johnson, 2020; Moyer, 2018). Currently, of the 19,000 in the Florida foster care system, 600 are without a place to call home (Adoption Exchange Association, n.d.). Foster parents and foster children benefit from holistic community and agency support (Johnson, 2020; Wells, 2006). The community needs to know how to support foster families so that families may meet all the needs, including the educational needs, of children in care (Johnson, 2020; Moyer, 2018; Wells, 2006).

### **Background of the Study**

Many researchers committed extensive time to understanding various aspects of foster care as it relates to education. The experience of foster care itself remains complex, so the body of research is diverse, but much educational research in this field focused on higher education

experiences (Philyaw, 2020; Rosenberg & Kim, 2018; Watt et al., 2019). Other perspectives include Cameron (2020), who focused on foster parents of pre-school-aged children, and Johnson (2020), who interviewed social workers. These researchers brought unique perspectives to the discussion of educational experiences but also uniformly agreed that youth in foster care face unique challenges that require assistance (Cameron et al., 2020; Johnson, 2020; Philyaw, 2020; Rosenberg & Kim, 2018; Watt et al., 2019).

Previous researchers who studied the complex experiences of education in foster care described the challenges of college for young adults with a history in foster care (Morton, 2017; Okpych & Courtney, 2014; Piel, 2018; Rosenberg & Kim, 2018; Watt et al., 2019). Despite the availability of financial assistance available to many children with a history in foster care, few foster youths went on to earn a bachelor's degree (Morton, 2017; Okpych & Courtney, 2014; Piel, 2018; Watt et al., 2019). Watt et al. (2019) used descriptive statistics from approximately 3,855 young adults with a history in foster care in a longitudinal study and found 49% had not graduated high school. Only 1.5% of the youths studied earned a bachelor's degree, and of the students eligible for tuition waivers, 46% did not utilize them, suggesting that more than financial assistance is necessary to assist foster youth in pursuing a college education (Watt et al., 2019).

Some youth were able to use waivers to overcome insufficient financial support, but many youth faced additional challenges, such as unstable living conditions and limited academic preparation (Piel, 2018). Morton (2017) conducted a phenomenological study researching the obstacles facing students pursuing a bachelor's degree who experienced placement in foster care. The young adults in the study struggled to ask for assistance and to connect with others (Morton, 2017). Researchers suggested youth need support to overcome past trauma as some youth studied

have developed survivalist tendencies (Morton, 2017; Piel, 2018). Youth coming from foster care have also faced the challenge of homelessness: according to statistical analysis with national data conducted by Rosenberg and Kim (2018), homelessness correlated to a lower chance of college graduation and employment. The variety of challenges youth with a history in foster care have faced due to past trauma and lack of support have made the pursuit of a college degree difficult (Morton, 2017; Piel, 2018; Rosenberg & Kim, 2018). And assisting them requires more than financial aid (Okpych & Courtney, 2014; Philyaw, 2020; Plante, 2017; Watt et al., 2019).

Other researchers focused on the requirements for success, highlighting the resilience of youth coming out of foster care, who despite the challenges stacked against them, succeeded in higher education endeavors (Philyaw, 2020; Plante, 2017). By interviewing six community college students with experience in foster care, Philyaw (2020) found that students strongly needed human connection and engagement as well as the right mindset. Plante's (2017) narrative study about how experience in foster care interacted with academic success in college found students benefited from assistance programs and would have benefited from mentoring. Okpych and Courtney (2014) found in a multi-state study of youth transitioning from foster care that a diploma, both for high school completion and college degree completion, correlated with greater affluence. Despite the challenges, some students coming from foster care managed to succeed and create a bright potential future (Okpych & Courtney, 2014; Philyaw, 2020; Plante, 2017).

Although less information exists about the educational experience of youth during time in foster care, research has established the transiency of placement in foster care negatively impacts youth (Johnson, 2020; Parker & Folkman, 2015). According to data collected from 2012, such youth had an average of 3.1 placements while in care (Parker & Folkman, 2015). The instability of moving placements also led to moving schools, putting children academically behind

(Johnson, 2020; Parker & Folkman, 2015; Piel, 2018). Johnson (2020) conducted a phenomenological study focused on the experience of social workers and found that although children are resilient, social worker burnout and lack of foster families made the placement of children in stable homes difficult.

Transiency in foster care has created trauma affecting more than academic performance (Parker & Folkman, 2015; Piel, 2018; Watson-Davis, 2010). Watson-Davis (2010) surveyed all teachers from six schools in the Los Angeles Unified school district in a quantitative study regarding the experience of school teachers with students in foster care. Of the teachers surveyed, 80.1% indicated students in foster care displayed academic problems, 91.4% reported the students displayed behavioral problems, and 94.7% indicated the students displayed social-emotional challenges; 92.7% of respondents believed that students needed more support in social-emotional development (Watson-Davis, 2010). The transiency of foster care has created challenges in a student's educational experience beyond academic delays (Parker & Folkman, 2015; Piel, 2018; Watson-Davis, 2010).

Students in foster care have also exhibited a higher need for educational services, but identifying the needs and accessing beneficial educational services has remained challenging (Cameron et al., 2020; Parker & Folkman, 2015; Watson-Davis, 2010). In the general population, about 13.1% of students use special education services, but the use of special education services among foster children is between 30% to 50% of children in care (Parker & Folkman, 2015). Researchers have suggested that teachers with a student in foster care may not be aware the student is in foster care which may hinder the child's access to beneficial services (Watson-Davis, 2010). Foster children may be placed in inappropriate environments when professionals misunderstand the child's trauma; for example, professionals may place a child in a

restrictive, unchallenging environment instead of a stimulating, integrated classroom (Parker & Folkman, 2015). Foster parents, teachers, and social workers all play important roles in supporting children in foster care but need better communication and support to ensure optimal placement of children in services (Cameron et al., 2020; Johnson, 2020; Parker & Folkman, 2015; Watson-Davis, 2010).

Some researchers described the experience of foster care from the college perspective, and other researchers focused on students during placement from the perspective of teachers or social workers, which provided useful insight into pieces of the child's experience (Johnson, 2020; Morton, 2017; Philyaw, 2020; Plante, 2017; Watson-Davis, 2010). However, a more holistic view of the experience of the child is essential for creating programs to train professionals and caretakers to help the child overcome trauma and thrive in all ways, including academically (Cameron et al., 2020; Piel, 2018). Children in foster care need more than educational support and financial aid; in order to effectively meet the needs of children in foster care, more research about the holistic experience of the child and how these experiences influence educational success must be completed (Parker & Folkman, 2015; Philyaw, 2020; Plante, 2017).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Bronfenbrenner (1979, p. 3) asserted, "A child's ability to learn to read in the primary grades may depend no less on how he is taught than on the existence and nature of ties between the school and the home." As such, an investigation into the educational development of the child must consider not only curriculum decisions and educational activities but also the interactions of the child and the ecological environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The innermost layer of the ecological environment, the microsphere, consists of not only settings in which a



child engages in face-to-face relationships but also the activities, roles, and interactions the child engages in, such as experiences at school, home, or church (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1994).

Continuing to the outer layer, Bronfenbrenner explained the mesosphere as interactions between the parts of the microsphere, such as a parent going to a school event or a neighbor babysitting the children. The exosystem and macrosystem are the additional layers, which are the indirect influencers, such as parents jobs and the society at large including public policies (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Because youth in foster care experience transition in many ways, the relationships developed and changed through care cannot be ignored while investigating the educational development of a child in care (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Gregory, 2020; Pears et al., 2015). As Bronfenbrenner (1979, p. 26) defined, “An ecological transition occurs whenever a person’s position in the ecological environment is altered as the result of a change in role, setting, or both.” For a child in care, every interaction in the microsystem changes to some capacity, such as new interactions with social workers from the agency, new activities with peers at school, and new roles within membership in a foster home (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Gregory, 2020; Johnson, 2020). Children in care greatly need stability and strong relationships in order to achieve academic success, so to understand the phenomenon of the educational development of a child in care, research must include the investigation of relationships between the child and new members of the microsystem as well as the interactions between members of the microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Johnson, 2020; Philyaw, 2020; Plante, 2017; Rosenberg & Kim, 2018).

In the context of foster care, an ecological theoretical framework provides the lens to view the educational experiences as not limited to curriculum decisions and educational mindsets but part of the developmental process, which includes relationships with teachers, biological

parents, foster parents, social workers, and other microsphere members (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Studying the educational experience of a child in foster care carries significant complexity (Morton, 2017; Philyaw, 2020; Somers et al., 2020). Children in foster care face a myriad of new relationships including new peers, new mentors, new parents, new social workers, and new counselors (Johnson, 2020; Philyaw, 2020). The research of this dissertation regarding the educational experience of children in foster care has focused on the microsphere and mesosphere to understand how ecological environments impact the academic development of a child in foster care.

### **Problem Statement**

For children in foster care, unfamiliarity is their reality. No matter how great or small the situation that brought them into foster care, the fact remains that all children in foster care experience challenges. The challenges, ranging from homelessness and family arrests to knowledge gaps and instability, impact the way they experience education (Morton, 2017; Moyer, 2018; Rosenberg & Kim, 2018; York, 2019). Social workers, school teachers, therapeutic counselors, and foster parents collectively play a role in creating a unique educational experience for them (Johnson, 2020; Morton, 2017; Moyer, 2018; Watson-Davis, 2010).

Although policy workers and community members desire to assist youth currently in foster care and aging out of foster care, the varying obstacles are difficult to overcome. For example, while many children who aged out of foster care were eligible for financial assistance for college, many of the eligible children did not use their financial benefits (Watt et al., 2019). Obstacles such as homelessness or lack of connections prevented many foster youth who aged out of care from pursuing higher education (Morton, 2017; Rosenberg & Kim, 2018). Additionally, social workers have faced burnout and stress, making building successful

relationships with youth in care feel burdensome (Johnson, 2020). Though burnout among social workers has hindered relationship building of youth currently in care, even youth who have aged out of care and achieved academic success through earning a college degree have continued to face relational difficulties in adulthood (Johnson, 2020; Philyaw, 2020).

Community members such as foster parents, social workers, and teachers also seek to help youth in foster care, but these community members have faced many trials (Johnson, 2020; Morton, 2017; Moyer, 2018; Watt et al., 2019). Social care workers desired to place foster children into the most effective homes but struggled to manage issues such as a lack of foster parents available and the need for more resources (Johnson, 2020). Likewise, Watson-Davis (2010) found many teachers desired to provide students in care with needed support but did not always receive timely information to provide services. Other teachers desired more time to invest in students without stringent focus on state requirements to better meet needs of students in foster care (Moyer, 2018). Foster parents have worked hard to assist children in their home, but have needed more support, structure, and training to effectively meet the children's needs (Cameron et al., 2020; Moyer, 2018).

Although much research exists describing educational experiences of children in foster care, many gaps remain (Johnson, 2020; Morton, 2017; Moyer, 2018; Watson-Davis, 2010). For example, Morton (2017) urged child welfare systems to provide greater support to teach children the needed skills in preparation of the transition into adulthood. Johnson (2020) called for further research to better prepare foster parents and improve adult outcomes for children in foster care. Watson-Davis (2010) recommended deeper research investigating supporting children in foster care in school, and Moyer (2018) recommended studying the experiences of youth in care who have had little educational success. Though much research exists regarding aging out of foster

care and adult transitions, less in-depth research exists focusing on the educational experience of young children struggling in foster care (Johnson, 2020; Morton, 2017; Moyer, 2018; Watson-Davis, 2010).

Foster parents and social workers desire to develop meaningful relationships so that children in foster care can be placed on the trajectory to success. Understanding the educational challenges and triumphs of foster parents raising elementary children in foster care may allow the foster care system to gain a more realistic perspective of the educational experience of elementary children in care. By understanding the experience of helping children in foster care achieve educational successes, programs can develop earlier interventions or training to lead to the lifelong establishment of effective educational skills leading to increasingly better placements with foster parents.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the educational experiences among elementary-aged children in foster care in Florida through the perspectives of their foster parents. In this study, educational experience was generally defined as all experiences related to the academic progress of the child.

### **Overview of Methodology**

For this qualitative, phenomenological study, which ascribes meaning to the educational experience of elementary children in foster care, foster parents in Florida participated in semi-structured interviews. A phenomenological study describes the meaning of experiences people have in common based on the reflections regarding a moment in time (van Manen et al., 2016). In this study, the children in foster care all experienced education while in care. Through criterion sampling, the researcher selected foster parents to interview to learn about their

perceptions regarding the educational experiences of the children in care. To participate in the sample, participants must have been currently licensed foster parents in Florida and have taken placement of an elementary-aged child in the year 2019 or later. In addition, the child must have remained in the home for a minimum of four months during the academic year to ensure the child meaningfully experienced education while in foster care.

### **Research Questions**

This study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the educational experiences of elementary-aged children in foster care from the perspective of foster parents?
2. How are foster parents prepared to assist children in foster care in their educational experience?

### **Research Design**

The purpose of qualitative, phenomenological research is to establish the meaning of an experience shared by several individuals (van Manen et al., 2016; Herrmann & Maly, 2013). Though various individuals may reflect upon experiences differently, the researcher sought to understand the experience in the moment, deeply seeking its true nature (Herrmann & Maly, 2013). In order to conduct phenomenological research, the researcher reflected upon the thoughts, expressions, feelings, and reflections of several individuals who shared in the common experience (van Manen, 2007). In analyzing the responses of the participants, the researcher translated the meaning behind the experience into text and, in doing so, expressed the meaning behind the shared experience based on the participants' reflections (van Manen et al., 2016).

Advancing through elementary education while living in a home that the government foster care system has assigned is an experience shared by children who have been in foster care

during the elementary season of their childhood (Hess, 2021; Mires et al., 2018). The unique phenomenon of pursuing academic endeavors while simultaneously navigating the many other challenges encompassed by life in foster care can be understood through phenomenological research (van Manen et al., 2016). By conducting interviews of multiple foster parents, the researcher gained insight into the many elements that unite to form the educational experience of a youth in care, such as relationships, communication, and learning. Through the analysis of the responses, the researcher discovered the common themes of educational experiences and interactions and described the meaning of these experiences (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; van Manen et al., 2016). Thereby, this research described the meaning of the educational experiences shared by youth in foster care during the elementary years through a phenomenological study (van Manen et al., 2016).

### **Data Collection**

To obtain participants for the sample, the researcher contacted a community foster parent support group and then created a demographic survey (Appendix A) to distribute online to prospective participants. The demographic survey contained questions regarding the age and timing of recent placements into the home for the purpose of determining whether a participant meets the criterion requirements and information detailing the purpose of the study. To participate in the study, a participant must have been a currently licensed foster parent in Florida and have taken placement of an elementary-aged child in the year 2019 or later. Additionally, the child must have been in the home for a minimum of four academic months. If the foster parent met the criteria and was interested in participation, the researcher contacted the potential participant to schedule an interview. Because the community foster parent support group is

connected to hundreds of foster families, the cooperation of the leadership was instrumental in obtaining enough participants who met the criteria.

Upon contacting potential participants to schedule an interview, the researcher requested to conduct the interviews online. During the initial contact, the potential participants listened to the purpose of the study and gave informed consent by signing and emailing a consent form before the interview date. The researcher continued to reach out to potential participants until eight participants were scheduled. The participants selected had placements that best represent elementary-aged children of different ages, long-term placements, and a variety of other demographic characteristics.

The Zoom platform enabled recording of both video and audio of the interviews, and also created a transcript of the interview. The researcher corrected any technological errors in the transcript and coded the names of participants to maintain privacy. In particular, the researcher did not share or discuss the identity of the child. All answers from the participants remained confidential and have been used for research purposes only. To make any needed corrections before the interview analysis, the participants received an email of the transcripts and had the opportunity to provide revisions. A secured laptop stored all recording transcriptions and analysis of the interviews, and a password-protected platform stored the data on the secured laptop.

## **Procedures**

Before conducting research, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained. Then, the researcher communicated with the foster care support group. After obtaining permission to distribute an electronic demographic survey, the researcher developed a survey included questions regarding age and duration of recent placement to determine whether

prospective participants met the criteria. To participate in the study, participants must have been a currently licensed foster parent in Florida and have taken placement of an elementary-aged child, who stayed in the home for a minimum of four academic months, during the year 2019 or later. The research moved forward when enough prospective parents who met the criteria responded to the survey.

Before contacting potential participants, the researcher created interview questions. The interview questions were open ended, allowing the participants to share freely regarding their experiences. Upon contacting eight prospective participants, the researcher scheduled an interview date. Participants all signed an informed consent form prior to the interview date. Zoom was the platform used for the purpose of recording both video and audio for all interviews.

After the interview, the researcher reviewed the transcript Zoom created of the interview, making all necessary corrections using the video and audio recordings. Next, the participants reviewed them and made any corrections as needed. The researcher resubmitted corrected transcripts (as needed) until participants validated the transcripts. The names of children and participants were changed and care was taken to avoid revealing any identifying information.

Once all transcripts were validated by participants, the transcripts were reread to understand the full story of each interview. The coding of the transcripts followed common threads. The codes were then developed into themes found in common throughout the interviews, using a process called lean coding in which a limited number of codes are expanded as important ideas emerge through the data analysis process (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Additionally, the researcher determined the significant statements that occurred. Through the coding process and the use of significant statements, the final themes emerged leading to new understandings of the educational experience of youth in foster care (Creswell & Poth, 2018).



## **Limitations**

The research was conducted only with foster families licensed in the state of Florida. The educational requirements for children and foster training requirements for licensed families differ from state to state (Adoption Exchange Association, n.d.); therefore, if someone conducted a similar study in another state, the results may vary. Although the results will be relevant and useful even for those in other states, the educational consequences for children in foster care may differ across state line. This study addressed only the educational experience of children in foster care in the state of Florida.

Additionally, this research made no requirement that participants of the study care for a child who officially received an individualized education plan (IEP). The selection of participants was based solely on whether the foster family recently had placement of an elementary-aged child for a sufficient duration of time. Special services provided in the school may have brought a welcomed additional level of support for a family or have left families feeling alone in the process which can be affected by various factors, such as the age of the child, the communication from the school, and the loss of engagement from the parents (Mires et al., 2018). Therefore, the study was not able to address the variation in educational experience of children who received special services and children who did not.

## **Definition of Key Terms**

The following words and phrases are key terms for the study.

- **children in foster care:** According to the Florida Department of Children and Families (2019), a child in foster care has been removed from their parent or guardian and is instead receiving care in a licensed foster home.

- **educational experiences:** All experiences that are related to the academic progress of the child, including, but not limited to, communication with teachers, rewards and consequences, behavioral management skills, creating organizational strategies, relationships with peers, interactions with tutors, and assistance from the licensing agency.
- **foster care:** According to the Florida Department of Children and Families (2019), individual or families who desire to care for dependent children and have been through the rigorous licensing process to become approved.
- **foster parents:** According to the Florida Department of Children and Families (2019), a foster parent is someone who has become licensed after being vetted to determine they can safely care for any children placed in their home. Foster parents receive a monthly stipend, but this amount is often not sufficient to cover all the needs of a child in care.

### **Significance of the Study**

Children living in the foster care system face significant challenges, but a stable environment helps children overcome obstacles (Cameron et al., 2020; Johnson, 2020; Labella et al., 2020; Navarro-Soria et al., 2020; Philyaw, 2020; Rosenberg & Kim, 2018). However, foster families often need more support than they receive to maintain a stable environment, making finding an adequate number of foster homes difficult for social workers (Gregory, 2020; Johnson, 2020). Although the educational experience is only one aspect of the foster care experience, understanding the complexities involved in the experience may enable agencies, academic institutions, support networks, and foster homes to become better able to help children in care (Moyer, 2018; Somers et al., 2020). Many supports for youth in care or youth exiting care

exist, but youth must have human connection for long-term success (Gross et al., 2020; Philyaw, 2020; Rosenberg & Kim, 2018). Therefore, future supports, programs, and assistance must involve improving the stability of the foster home and improving the ability of foster parents to navigate the educational experience of children in care (Johnson, 2020; Moyer, 2018).

### **Summary**

Children in foster care have faced a myriad of challenges, including educational challenges (Moyer, 2018; Philyaw, 2020; Rosenberg & Kim, 2018). Although a lack of resources creates challenges, many community members such as teachers, counselors, and social workers have still desired to help children in foster care (Johnson, 2020; Moyer, 2018). Though a stable foster home carries many positive implications for children, foster parents have often been unable to carry the burden of meeting the needs of children in care alone (Johnson, 2020; Plante, 2017; Rosenberg & Kim, 2018). Understanding the holistic educational experience of a child in care not only benefits foster parents but also agencies, schools, and organizations purposed to support foster families (Morton, 2017; Philyaw, 2020).

To gain understanding of the educational experience of children in foster care, this research has focused on the holistic educational experience of youth during their time in care. Connecting to a local foster care support network allowed the researcher to gain connections and access to foster parents. The researcher interviewed foster parents to gain insight into the educational experience of elementary-aged children who were or are in the parents' care. Through open-ended questions, the researcher gained knowledge regarding specific experiences of elementary youth in care. Analysis of the knowledge gained has allowed the researcher to explore the educational experiences among elementary-aged children in foster care in Florida through the perspective of their foster parents.

## II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the educational experiences among elementary-aged children in foster care in Florida through the perspectives of their foster parents. In this study, educational experience was generally defined as all experiences related to the academic progress of the child. Many programs exist to assist youth educationally and financially after transitioning from care, but without appropriate supportive relationships, youth have been unable to use these supports successfully (Watt et al., 2019; Wilson, 2015); children in foster care need stability (Johnson, 2020; Morton, 2017; Rosenberg & Kim, 2018). Finding stable, supportive placement for youth in care has been challenging as strained parenting experiences have led to disruptions and social workers have often lacked available foster homes (Johnson, 2020; Leathers et al., 2019). Despite the challenges, many youth have exited care with the needed abilities for academic success (Philyaw, 2020; Plante, 2017). While much research exists on the educational development of children, the manner in which the holistic development of a child in foster care impacts educational achievement needs further research (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Morton, 2017; Philyaw, 2020; Piaget, 1952; Vygotskiĭ & Cole, 1978).

### **History of Foster Care**

While finding solutions to aid children who cannot live with biological family is not a new problem, foster care is a relatively new solution (Rymph, 2017). In the beginnings of the United States, parents who could not care for their children would seek boarding homes or

indenture their children, rather than look to the government for assistance (Hacsi, 1995; Rymph, 2017). Children who were indentured would learn a trade or work for the family with whom they lived (Hacsi, 1995). Boarding homes were similar to foster homes because the child left their biological home and lived with a non-relative who received payment, but the government did not need to be involved in these private arrangements (Rymph, 2017).

Distinct from boarding homes, orphan trains were a solution for children with no family to care for them who needed a permanent home (Rymph, 2017). Around the middle of the 19th century, the Children's Aid Society believed children would do better with a rural family than in an institution (Hacsi, 1995). Children went from urban communities to rural communities where children would live, but living with a new family did not necessitate a legal adoption (Hacsi, 1995; Rymph, 2017). Because agencies placing out children felt a great urgency to get children into a good home, the agencies were not always mindful about gaining legal custody of children in their care or vetting homes for placement (Hacsi, 1995). Toward the end of the 19th century, the agencies not only improved their vetting of families, but some organizations, such as Societies for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, also gained more power to remove children as people became more aware of child abuse (Hacsi, 1995).

Placing children out to foster homes began as a free placement, in which older children may work in the home to earn their keep and younger children were simply nurtured (Hacsi, 1995). However, agencies did not want children only to be valued for their labor, and many began paying the foster family for the placement (Hacsi, 1995; Rymph, 2017). Paying the home where the children were boarded out led to increased scrutiny of the boarding homes (Hacsi, 1995). Although the practice of boarding out increased, many children still remained in institutional care at the beginning of the 20th century (Hacsi, 1995).

When the United States went into the Great Depression, families in the strains of poverty needed help, so the number of children placed into care increased (Rymph, 2017). During the 1900s to 1930s, social work became increasingly professional and policy shifted away from institutional care and toward licensed foster homes (Hacsi, 1995). The U.S. Children's Bureau was established in 1912, but the Bureau did not take over all child placement (Hegar & Scannapieco, 1995). Many arrangements were still private, but government agencies became increasingly involved in placing children into foster family homes, partially due to the development of the juvenile court system (Hacsi, 1995; Rymph, 2017). Throughout the 1930s an increasing number of states required foster homes to be licensed (Rymph, 2017).

When World War II hit, many single women saw no other option than placing their children in foster care, which was still often done voluntarily during the 1940s (Rymph, 2017). During the time period during and after the war, the use of institutional care greatly declined as placement in foster homes increased (Hacsi, 1995). The need for foster homes increased, and the agencies advertised for more foster homes (Rymph, 2017). The children in foster care were often placed out of home due to unwed pregnancy, illness, homelessness, poverty, or a parent's loss of a job, which could, in some cases, be indirect results of the war (Rymph, 2017). In 1950, the number of children in foster homes surpassed the number of children in institutionalized care (Hacsi, 1995). Into the 1960s, more foster homes were needed, and by 1968, the number of children boarded out to foster homes was over three times greater than the number of children in institutionalized care (Hacsi, 1995).

The post-war era led to a more academic approach to foster care, with a great increase in studies conducted on foster parents and how to recruit (Rymph, 2017). Toward the end of the 19th century, more attention was given to how children were impacted by child abuse and

parental neglect (Hacsi, 1995; Hegar & Scannapieco, 1995). Despite the increase in studies, tension remained between case management and foster parents as the role of foster parents remained ambiguous (Rymph, 2017). Additionally, experts believed children entering care in the post-war era were more damaged and difficult to care for due to the circumstances bringing them into care, such as a disorganized family or marital breakdown, which differed from children coming into care due to illness or some other temporary set-back of the birth family (Rymph, 2017). Recruiting needed families for placement of children was difficult because agencies expected motivations to be pure and loving, not relying on payments, and agencies desired families who would not be interested in adopting the children but were also able to handle difficult to place children (Rymph, 2017).

In the 1960s federal funds became available for foster care, and, over time, the foster care system became entirely government run (Hegar & Scannapieco, 1995; Rymph, 2017). Foster care still carried many problems, such as the lack of permanency for children (Rymph, 2017). While foster care was meant only to be temporary, too often children were left in the system, unable to return to biological family but also unable to be legally adopted (Rymph, 2017). Living with a relative in kinship care became a more common option, but many other children were moved from placement to placement and suffered emotional damage from the instability (Hegar & Scannapieco, 1995; Rymph, 2017). In 1980, Congress passed the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act, which included adoption subsidies, but also focused efforts on services to prevent breaking apart families (Hacsi, 1995; Rymph, 2017). The focus turned to permanency for children in care (Rymph, 2017).

## **Challenges of Foster Care**

Since the beginnings of foster care, the government of the United States has developed many programs and initiatives to help children in foster care, but children who come from a foster care background do not always take advantage of programs available to them (Rymph, 2017; Watt et al., 2019; Wilson, 2015). Many children in foster care have faced the difficulty of multiple placements, which has created a lack of stability and meaningful relationship for many youth (Johnson, 2020; Pears et al., 2015; Vreeland et al., 2020). Additionally, many youth transitioning from foster care have faced the struggles of homelessness (Rosenberg & Kim, 2018). Schools, agencies, and foster homes have not always had the needed support to address these challenges (Johnson, 2020; Mires et al., 2018; Moyer, 2018).

In 2018, Rosenberg and Kim collected data, using the National Youth in Transition Data, as well as The Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System, to determine the impact of homelessness on youth in care. Rosenberg and Kim (2018) collected data from 4,235 youth in foster care who in 2011 became 17 years old. Youth from the ages of 17 to 19 were less likely to receive an education or to begin new employment if they were homeless (Rosenberg & Kim, 2018). The researchers also found that youth who had been placed in a group home rather than a traditional foster home were less likely to receive a post-secondary education (Rosenberg & Kim, 2018).

Many transitions have also led to negative outcomes for youth in foster care (Johnson, 2020; Pears et al., 2015; Vreeland et al., 2020). In 2015, Pears et al. studied the impact that moving from home to home had on youth in care. The researchers initially obtained a sample of 117 youth between the ages of three and six and tracked that sample for two years, tracking school changes and recording academic progress (Pears et al., 2015). Pears et al. used the data to



determine the relationship between early school transitions and academic success. Changing schools many times early on was associated with lower socioemotional competence, but only for children with low early learning skills when starting kindergarten. Therefore, while multiple transitions can have many negative outcomes, not all children in care have been impacted the same way.

The disruptions that lead to multiple placements have been caused by many factors (Vreeland et al., 2020). In 2020, Vreeland et al. conducted a study using data from over 20,000 youth in care, but only analyzed data regarding youth who were no longer in the foster care system during the final observation, bringing the sample size down to 8,853 school-aged youth in care who lived in Tennessee and had a Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths Assessment (CANS). Using both correlation and linear regression, Vreeland et al. (2020) identified many factors associated with shorter placements and more placements. Youth who were externalizing or internalizing problems, who had troubles in school, who had relationship troubles, or who were older than average had a greater likelihood of having shorter placements and more placements. Educational risks were linked with an increased risk of disruption, but increased disruptions were also shown to exacerbate educational risks, creating a negative cycle for youth in care (Pears et al., 2015; Vreeland et al., 2020). Placing youth in a stable home has been challenging for case managers but is imperative as instability can negatively impact a child's education (Johnson, 2020; Pears et al., 2015; Vreeland et al., 2020).

Johnson (2020) interviewed social workers in his phenomenological study to address attachments and placements of children in foster care. Johnson's research indicates that poor placements can lead to multiple placements which create negative effects in the lives of children (Johnson, 2020). To achieve academic success later on in life, research showed children need

stability during time of placement to develop meaningful attachments and to maintain positive behaviors (Johnson, 2020; Plante, 2017). Additionally, Johnson (2020) showed through his study the essential value of connection between the social worker and the child, as well as the social worker and the family. Multiple placements exacerbated the difficulty of building strong relationships (Johnson, 2020; Morton, 2017; Plante, 2017).

Children in care have faced a myriad of challenges but also struggle to navigate challenges without the development of strong relationships (Rosenberg & Kim, 2018; Vreeland et al., 2020). Homelessness, disruptions, and academic delays all can make successful adult life more difficult for children who come from care (Morton, 2017; Plante, 2017; Rosenberg & Kim, 2018). Even though the development of meaningful relationships does not come easily to many children with a background in foster care, for many, human connection was necessary to attain academic success in college (Morton, 2017; Philyaw, 2020).

### **Higher Education for Former Youth in Care**

The many challenges faced during time in care have often caused difficulties in adult life (Philyaw, 2020; Plante, 2017; Rosenberg & Kim, 2018). The body of research regarding the complex experience of foster care is diverse, but much research has emphasized the experiences of youth from care in higher education (Morton, 2017; Philyaw, 2020; Plante, 2017). Youth coming from a background of foster care have faced unique challenges, but many have overcome challenges and created successful educational outcomes (Morton, 2017; Philyaw, 2020; Plante, 2017).

In 2020, Gross et al. researched the decisions regarding college made by youth formerly in care. The quantitative research used a sample of 171,300 college freshman of whom 1,147 had been in foster care or a dependent of the court during the ages of 13 to 17 (Gross et al., 2020).

The researchers used a least squares regression model to analyze the relationship between the demographic information, college readiness, and college enrollment, drawing many conclusions. Youth from foster care were less academically prepared than students who had not been in care, but the data also showed little difference in academic behaviors between the two groups. Gross et al. also found that youth from foster care attended colleges further away from their home but cared more about the religious affiliation of the school. Additionally, youth from foster care were less likely to be influenced by relatives to attend college. Youth from foster care stated they were more likely to go to counseling when in need than youth not in care, but unfortunately youth from foster care were also less likely to believe in their own academic success (Gross et al., 2020). Therefore, the research confirms the idea that success in college is possible for former youth from care but also confirms that youth from foster care face unique educational challenges and could benefit from academic supports even before entering college (Gross et al., 2020; Philyaw, 2020; Plante, 2017).

Many youth from foster care struggled to graduate from college (Morton, 2017; Philyaw, 2020; Plante, 2017). Morton (2017) conducted a phenomenological study where 21 college students, who had previously been in foster care, were asked about the barriers to obtaining a bachelor's degree. While the young adults in the study knew the significance of strong human connections, the young adults struggled to ask for assistance and to connect with others (Morton, 2017). In contrast, Philyaw (2020) conducted a case study that researched the success stories of students currently enrolled in community college who had previously been in foster care. Philyaw's study focused on the experiences that enable students who experienced foster care to go on to succeed in college. Students strongly needed engagement, human connection, and the

right mindset, but achieving success in community college did not mean students achieved success in all areas of life. Students still faced struggles outside of academia (Philyaw, 2020).

Students have struggled in college, but research has demonstrated that additional services can make college success more attainable for students (Plante, 2017). Plante interviewed 10 young adults, who were former youth in care and were also enrolled in college or had recently graduated college, about what experiences contributed to success in higher education.

Additionally, Plante studied how the students overcame obstacles and how student's past experiences in foster care interacted with academic success in college. Assistance programs benefitted many students, and students would have profited from mentoring services. The interviews also revealed not only the positive relationship between motivation and success, but also the critical need youth in care have for stable and consistent placements (Plante, 2017).

While some college students were able to achieve academic success, students who were formerly youth in care face a myriad of challenges, both academic and otherwise (Morton, 2017; Philyaw, 2020; Plante, 2017).

Social supports impacted the post-secondary educational experience of youth with a background in foster care (Katz & Geiger, 2019). In 2019, Katz and Geiger interviewed 15 young adults who had recently been in foster care to understand how youth are socially supported during the transition out of foster care and how the transition impacts post-secondary education. Youth transitioning out of care felt the loss of formal support (Katz & Geiger, 2019). The self-reliance of students had a positive impact, but so did relationships with friends and support groups. Youth needed skills to navigate adult life, and the students without family and friends struggled at the loss of support upon transitioning to adulthood. Stability and relationship

building would have positively impacted youth transitioning from care (Katz & Geiger, 2019; Philyaw, 2020).

Financial support for college has been helpful, but has not adequately met the needs of former youth in care who needed stability and support (Johnson, 2020; Navarro-Soria et al., 2020; Watt et al., 2019). In 2019, Watt et al. (2019) studied youth who had been in foster care in the state of Texas. Of the 3,855 youth who had previously been in foster care, only 1.5% earned a bachelor's degree, and of the students eligible for a tuition waiver, only 46% used the waiver. Wilson (2015) also studied youth from foster care to determine the effectiveness of services meant to help youth transition from foster care into independent living. The study of 1,242 youth, roughly half in care and the remainder transitioned out of care, from four different programs found that youth participation in services was positively associated with positive expectations for success at a significant level (Wilson, 2015).

While youth transitioning out of care had many resources available to them, not all youth used the resources (Watt et al., 2019; Wilson, 2015). Youth in care can develop a survivalist mentality and struggle to ask for help, as Morton (2017) determined through his interviews of 21 former youth from care who were enrolled in college. Financial programs do not adequately meet the needs of youth from care because students need meaningful relationships where they can learn to ask for help in order to even make use of resources available (Morton, 2017; Watt et al., 2019). Youth need greater supports before transitioning into adult life as the lack of strong relationships developed while in care can negatively impact youth transitioning into adult life (Morton, 2017; Plante, 2017).

## **Educational Challenges for Children in Foster Care**

While many former youth from care have struggled for academic success in college, many needed support long before college enrollment (Johnson, 2020; Morton, 2017; Plante, 2017; Watson-Davis, 2010). For example, elementary teachers in Watson-Davis's (2010) research indicated students needed assistance in the area of social-emotional development. In 2020, Johnson surveyed caseworkers who indicated that while children were resilient, the many transitions from home to home led children to decline in academic performance. To counteract this effect, students needed support from the case worker in the form of strong communication and successful placement (Johnson, 2020). The supports needed for academic success vary, but research has aligned indicating youth in foster care need support and stability to academically thrive (Johnson, 2020; Morton, 2017; Navarro-Soria et al., 2020; Philyaw, 2020; Plante, 2017; Watson-Davis, 2010).

Many community members, such as social workers and elementary teachers, have sought to assist children in foster care, but a lack of communication has made assistance challenging (Johnson, 2020; Watson-Davis, 2010). Watson-Davis (2010) conducted a quantitative study, collecting data on 151 elementary teachers through a survey regarding the experiences of elementary teachers with children in foster care in the classroom. Most teachers stated that not enough communication existed, but some teachers had received information regarding children in foster care in their classes (Watson-Davis, 2010). The research of Watson-Davis (2010) confirms that helping a child in foster care to academically succeed has been a challenging task for teachers, due to issues such as behavior problems, social-emotional behaviors, and lack of focus. Researchers have demonstrated that children in foster care need support and stability to achieve academically (Johnson, 2020; Watson-Davis, 2010).

Whether supports have been feasible, children in care have been in need of supports (Johnson, 2020; Navarro-Soria et al., 2020; Watson-Davis, 2010). In 2019, Navarro-Soria et al. (2020) studied the impact of foster care on Spanish children regarding clinical symptoms and impairment. In the study, Navarro-Soria et al. (2020) evaluated anxiety, depression, sluggish cognitive tempo, ADHD-inattention, ADHD-hyperactivity/impulsivity, oppositional defiant disorder, limited prosocial emotions, and social and academic deficiencies. Additionally, the researchers evaluated whether or not the amount of time in foster care predicted a reduction in any of the measured clinical symptoms and impairments (Navarro-Soria et al., 2020). In the study, parents of 1,776 children who were not foster parents completed the Child and Adolescent Behavior Inventory (CABI), while foster parents to 49 children also completed the CABI (Navarro-Soria et al., 2020). Conclusively, Navarro-Soria et al. (2020) found that the children in foster care had higher scores for all measured clinical symptoms and impairments at a statistically significant level. However, after eight to 86 months in foster care, this difference lessened. In fact, “children with a longer duration in foster care did not differ from the non-foster care groups on anxiety, depression, ADHD-IN, ADHD-HI, LPE, social and academic impairment” (Navarro-Soria et al., 2020, p. 1). While the challenges faced were significant, providing stability effectively mitigated many of the harmful impairments children in foster care experienced (Navarro-Soria et al., 2020).

Children in care may have experienced many different challenges, such as abuse or neglect, but research has shown that neglect even in the first year of life can significantly impact a child (Carroll, 2019). In 2019, Carroll sought to study the needs of children who experience neglect early in life regarding the ability to regulate and function at school. Specifically, Carroll (2019) studied the effects of neglect during the first year of a child’s life by recording heart rate,

executive function skills, and processing speed for six children from the ages of five to eight who had been neglected during the first year of life and 26 children, also from the ages of five to eight, who had not been neglected. Based on the findings, the researcher believed it possible that early neglect led to lower achievement in the area of executive functioning (Carroll, 2019). Additionally, the inability to regulate themselves inhibited the ability of the children who had been neglected to make adequate academic progress (Carroll, 2019). Unfortunately, schools too often have fixated on the necessary push to finish curriculum goals and have not been flexible to adapt to the unique development of children who have been neglected, often providing them with academic supports that do not address the actual struggles of the children (Carroll, 2019).

Because the academic struggles faced by children in foster care are varied, academic responses from school have been inadequate responses (Carroll, 2019; Watson-Davis, 2010). Children thrive when in a stable environment (Navarro-Soria et al., 2020). While schools have not been able to address all aspects of a child's wholistic development, the schools have been able to provide some assistance to youth in care (Bryan et al., 2017; Mires et al., 2018; Watson-Davis, 2010).

### **The Role of Schools**

Because youth in foster care face many challenges, many supports are beneficial to the educational development of youth in care, and while some schools have been able to provide some of these supports, other schools have struggled (Bryan et al., 2017; Gregory, 2020; Johnson, 2020; Moyer, 2018; Philyaw, 2020). In 2018, in a phenomenological study regarding the experiences of youth in foster care pertaining to educational development, Moyer interviewed 19 teachers, 14 foster parents, and 12 young adults who aged out of foster care. Foster parents desired additional support from placing agencies, and teachers desired flexibility



from state requirements to meet the unique needs of students in care (Moyer, 2018). Schools needed the ability to be sensitive to trauma and would have benefitted from mental health services for students (Moyer, 2018). Many people in the community, such as teachers and foster parents, have desired to help children in care but have lacked the proper supports to do so (Moyer, 2018).

Some schools were able to provide helpful supports to foster parents (Mires et al., 2018). In 2018 Mires et al. interviewed seven foster parents caring for a school-aged child with a disability in a case study. Foster parents caring for an elementary-aged child were pleased with the collaboration between the school and the home for the educational benefit of the child (Mires et al., 2018). However, Mires et al. (2018) found that parents caring for secondary school students had negative interactions with the school. The negative experience of the secondary school resulted from unclear expectations and a lack of communication (Mires et al., 2018). The secondary parents in the study did not take an active role in the child's educational as compared to the elementary parents (Mires et al., 2018). Secondary foster parents needed support, but may also have benefitted from taking a more active role in the education of the child in care (Mires et al., 2018).

Many high school staff have had influence regarding the future college enrollment of students (Bryan et al., 2017). In 2017, Bryan et al. sought to determine whether college conversations with teachers, coaches, and counselors had a positive impact on college enrollment. The research used previously collected data from the Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002 which included data from 13,983 student who were sophomores in 2002. Bryan et al. determined that the intensity of college talk during a student's senior year increased the likelihood of the student enrolling in college in the future. In the end, Bryan et al. (2017)

suggested that schools restructure the process of sharing information with students to ensure that multiple people are communicating with students, particularly seniors, and are providing concrete guidance to students.

In 2020, Somers et al. conducted research regarding the relationship between student characteristics, number of placements changes, and performance at school, using a sample of 363 children from the ages of nine to 11 and their caregivers. The interviews produced quantitative data, which were then analyzed using a hierarchical linear regression (Somers et al., 2020). The researchers found that future orientation, which is how strongly the student believes in their own future accomplishments, and school connectedness were positively correlated with each other. Additionally, Somers et al. found that almost half of students in the sample had received a disciplinary referral and 20% had to repeat a grade, both higher rates than the national average. While number of placements did not explain variance in academic achievement, the number of placements was weakly negatively correlated with future orientation. The lack of correlation to academic achievement may have been a result of the focus on current placement and grades rather than previous placements, as noted by Somers et al. As a result of the findings, Somers et al. (2020) suggested that schools take a stronger role in helping youth to develop future goals and to feel connected to the school.

Academic issues, administrative issues, and home issues, among others, made facilitating needed supports for children in foster care challenging for schools and families (Hess, 2021). In 2021, Hess conducted an email interview, due to COVID constraints, and obtained information from 19 principals or assistant principals from a school district in Illinois. In the qualitative study, Hess found that teachers needed more supports and resources to assist students in care. Additionally, the timeliness of communication with social workers impacted students. Teachers

and administrators wanted to better serve these students, but lacked the capacity to do so. While many resources and supports have existed for youth in care, the transiency of their life have made accessing supports difficult (Hess, 2021).

Many schools have tried addressing the needs of youth in care (Hess, 2021; Mires et al., 2018). However, schools also face pressures to meet curriculum expectations and may not have adequate resources to address the nonacademic needs of children in care (Carroll, 2019; Moyer, 2018). While assistance from the school has benefitted youth in care in many ways, the great challenges faced by youth in care necessitate assistance from more than one environment (Hess, 2021; Mires et al., 2018; Moyer, 2018).

### **Positive Affirmation**

Students are influenced by environmental stimulation, interactions with and thoughts about the environment, and thought about themselves (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Dweck & Sorich, 1999). The development of a child is complex and affected by people interacted with daily in the microsphere, but development is also affected the more complex interactions between different microsphere elements and environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). As noted by Bronfenbrenner, mesosphere interactions may include things like relationships established between parents and teachers at school. Therefore, as both a part of the microsphere and mesosphere, the creation of an environment at school where children learn to face challenges remains a critical piece to enhancing the development of children, including children in foster care (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Dweck & Sorich, 1999).

According to Dweck and Sorich (1999, p. 232), "research has shown that a crucial factor in achievement is students' ability to cope with challenges and setbacks." Similarly, Claro et al. (2016) studied the way a growth mindset relates to economic status and academic achievement.

The researchers tested all 10th graders in Chile about mathematics and language arts and also surveyed the same students using a shorter version of the Dweck Growth Mindset survey (Claro et al., 2016). The results showed that growth mindset predicted achievement with the same strength that family income predicted achievement. While Claro et al. determined that lower income students were less likely to have a growth mindset, the research additionally showed that those in a lower income bracket with a growth mindset were less likely to suffer effects of poverty on achievement. Additionally, growth mindset students outperformed their peers at every economic level, showing the benefits of developing a growth mindset are for everyone (Claro et al., 2016).

In 2016, Brady et al. conducted a study to see the effects of affirmation on academic performance, specifically for Latino or White first-year or second-year college students. In the study, 183 college students were divided into an experimental and control group where the experimental group wrote an essay about a positive value in themselves while the control group wrote about a positive value in someone else (Brady et al., 2016). Additionally, Brady et al., collected starting and ending GPA data. While Latinos had a higher GPA after the study, the impact on White students was minimal. The results indicated that it is possible for positive affirmation to positively impact academic performance and lead to achievement gains (Brady et al., 2016).

### **Need for Supports**

While nothing can remove all the challenges faced by children in foster care, many supports have been implemented to assist youth in care and to assist youth transitioning out of care (Rosenberg & Kim, 2018; Wilson, 2015). Some support programs have proven effective, but some supports have been underutilized (Watt et al., 2019; Wilson, 2015). Supports for foster

children have included effective placement, meaningful relationships, foster parent training, economic assistance, mentoring programs, and more (Cameron et al., 2020; Johnson, 2020; Rosenberg & Kim, 2018; Watt et al., 2019). Proper support has made a significant impact on the lives of many youth from care (Philyaw, 2020; Plante, 2017).

Children in foster care placed in homes experiencing significant stress were more likely to experience disruption, which is removal from the foster home and placement elsewhere (Leathers et al., 2019). Shorter placement times and more placements, often due to disruptions, were associated with difficulties in school and relationship troubles (Vreeland et al., 2020). For the 8,853 youth from five to 19 years old in Tennessee who were in custody between July 2012 and July 2017 who had a Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths assessment completed, the median number of placements was three, with the highest number at 26, and the lowest at one (Vreeland et al., 2020). The problem of disruptions has been prolific, and foster parents have faced many stressful situations (Leathers et al., 2019; Vreeland et al., 2020). Without a sufficient number of available foster homes, social workers have struggled with proper placement of youth (Johnson, 2020). To provide a stable environment for youth in care, foster parents need support to manage the challenging behaviors and stresses, but have not always received the support needed (Leathers et al., 2019; Moyer, 2018).

Despite the challenges, the research has proven that stability positively impacts children (Navarro-Soria et al., 2020; Rosenberg & Kim, 2018). Children placed in a traditional foster home were more likely to obtain a post-secondary degree than those who were placed in a group home (Rosenberg & Kim, 2018). Therefore, stable, functionable foster families have made significant positive impacts in the life of youth in foster care (Rosenberg & Kim, 2018). In 2020, Labella et al. studied children referred to Child Protective Services during infancy or

toddlerhood, comparing children remaining with their birth family to children placed in a foster home. In the study, the birth family and foster families were divided, with some receiving Attachment and Bio-behaviors Catch-Up training, a parenting intervention, but regardless of whether families received the training, the children placed with foster parents showed lower anger dysregulation and higher adaptive regulation (Labella et al., 2020). Additionally, Navarro-Soria et al. (2020) showed a reduction in clinical symptoms for children who had been in care for at least eight months. Placement in a traditional, stable foster home has been shown to have a significant positive impact on children's ability to regulate and in reducing clinical symptoms, such as anxiety (Labella et al., 2020; Navarro-Soria et al., 2020).

Providing specific education techniques can improve confidence of foster parents (Cameron et al., 2020). In London, Cameron et al. (2020) interviewed four foster parents who had pre-school-aged children. Before conducting the interview, the foster parents learned a strategy for pre-school education regarding the use of treasure baskets. The foster parents were viewed as an integral part of early education rather than focusing on the child's educational development at school. Providing training where foster parents have a voice empowered foster parents to take ownership of educational decisions for children in their care (Cameron et al., 2020). Training has been shown to effectively prepare foster parents, but some training needs time to implement which requires stable placements (Cameron et al., 2020; Labella et al., 2020).

Not all persons assisting children in care benefit from additional education (York, 2019). In 2019, York used a chi-squared analysis to determine whether the education level of the Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) was associated with the permanency outcome for the child. The research used data from 78 CASAs in the northwestern United States from January 1st, 2012 to January 1st, 2017, using one case per CASA (York, 2019). York did not find a relationship

between the education level of the CASAs and the permanency outcomes for children in foster care. Therefore, focusing on education of CASAs is not the best use of resources to ensure the best possible outcome for children in foster care (York, 2019).

Other supports, such as mentoring, have been shown fruitful to the development of youth in care (Sulimani-Aidari et al., 2019). Studying in Israel, Sulimani-Aidari et al. studied the impact mentoring has on hope for youth in care and concluded that mentoring relationships are significant to youth in regard to the development of hope. One specific finding was that the duration of the mentoring relationship had a positive correlation with hope, indicating that a longer mentoring relationship corresponded to greater levels of hope (Sulimani-Aidari et al., 2019). This finding corroborates the great need for strong, stable relationships for youth in care in order to prepare youth for their adult lives (Morton, 2017; Philyaw, 2020; Sulimani-Aidari et al., 2019).

While making effective use of assistance programs has been challenging for many youth, the need for support has remained prevalent (Morton, 2017; Pears et al., 2015; Sulimani-Aidari et al., 2019; Watt et al., 2019). Youth have benefitted from a variety of supports, such a training of foster parents and mentoring relationships (Cameron et al., 2020; Sulimani-Aidari et al., 2019). However, the need for stable foster placements has been critical, with instability often a contributing factor to academic struggles (Johnson, 2020; Leathers et al., 2019; Vreeland et al., 2020).

### **Wraparound Support**

Children in foster care have needed a stable environment in which to thrive, an environment in which to develop meaningful relationships and connections (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Labella et al., 2020; Rosenberg & Kim, 2018). However, children have not been able to

thrive in a stable environment because for some, no stable environment has been available (Johnson, 2020; Leathers et al., 2019). In order to combat this problem, some organizations have developed a system of wraparound support for foster parents, with one of the goals being the prevention of foster parents from quitting (Barrick, 2021; Griffith, 2019). Wraparound care is the development of a circle of support around foster families and adoptive families, providing supports such as babysitting services, clothing purchases, and making meals (Barrick, 2021). Both Barrick (2021) and Griffith (2019) reflected that churches must step up to provide wraparound support for foster families in their community to help the plight of orphaned children.

In 2019, Griffith conducted a study to determine the effectiveness of the newly developed foster care ministry at Journey Church in Kenosha, Wisconsin. Journey Church implemented a foster care ministry using the CompaCare model, a framework for churches to effectively provide wraparound care to foster families (Griffith, 2019). A pre-study survey was administered to 14 foster parents before the foster care ministry was established and implemented. None of the respondents ranked the support for foster parents as highly effective. Over a year later, Griffith administered a post-study survey completed by nine of the foster parents. In the post-study survey, 22% of respondents ranked the ministry at a four or five on a scale of zero to five in effectiveness (Griffith, 2019). According to Griffith (2019), twelve months after implementing the CompaCare model at Journey Church, the program “experienced a positive shift in overall satisfaction of the foster care ministry by 25%” (p. 136). After implementing CompaCare, none of the participants were highly unlikely to continue being foster parents, a 14% reduction from the result of the pre-study survey (Griffith, 2019). Local churches have the ability to influence



the longevity of foster homes, thereby increasing the likelihood that a child in foster care will have a stable placement (Griffith, 2019).

Similarly, in 2021, Barrick conducted a project, implementing a foster ministry called Be the Village, using the CompaCare model at Enid First Assembly in Oklahoma. Before launching the ministry, Barrick (2021) sent a survey, or pretest, to foster parents in his church that he had interviewed, finding that the foster families were not supported and felt they must manage on their own. After careful planning, the church launched the wraparound ministry. Six months after the start of the ministry, which was also 10 months after the pretest, Barrick conducted a posttest. On the posttest, none of the respondents answered they were left to cope on their own, but in the pretest, three of the eight respondents had felt alone or very alone. After completion of the project, Barrick reflected on the importance of the thoughtful launch of the ministry, carefully evaluating and planning each step, but also the significance of the support received, in particular from the leadership of the church. Finally, Barrick (2021) emphasized the importance of the response of the church to alleviating the crisis of foster care.

Wraparound supports have been implemented to increase the longevity and effectiveness of foster families which in turn positively impacts youth in care by meeting the need for stability (Barrick, 2021; Griffith, 2019). All youth develop through complex interactions between themselves and their environment, and churches are excellent places to develop connections across different parts of a child's environment (Allen & Lawton, 2012; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In churches, children can see and participate in the interaction of many environments, and parents can connect children to mentors who are not already in the family (Allen & Lawton, 2012). From an ecological framework of the development of the child, developing wraparound support for foster families in a church setting not only strengthens the abilities of the child to

connect to foster parents, but also facilitates relationships in different areas of a child's environmental system (Allen & Lawton, 2012; Barrick, 2021; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Griffith, 2019). In order to provide children in foster care the stability they need, foster families have needed support; churches have been able to meet those needs, but not enough churches have taken the time to create an effective wraparound ministry (Barrick, 2021).

### **Future Research**

While research has established the vast needs of children in care and the hindrances associated with transitioning from care into adult life, more research is needed on the holistic development of the child in foster care (Leathers et al., 2019; Moyer, 2018; Navarro-Soria et al., 2020). Plante (2017) and Navarro-Soria et al. (2020) recommended more longitudinal studies that may show how needs of youth who have been in foster care change over time, and Philyaw (2020) recommended collaborative research where social works and educational researchers come together to see the whole picture. Understanding the network of relationships, Mires et al. (2018) additionally supported collaborative research, recommending interviews of educational professionals regarding the relationships between the home and the school. More specifically, Pears et al. (2015) recommended research distinguishing school moves due to placement changes and school moves due to other factors. A child's development does not consist of separate factors, but rather complex interactions between themselves and the various aspects of the environments in which they exist (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Therefore, for a child in foster care, the academic development cannot be isolated from the newly developing relationships within the foster home (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Foster parents have had many critical roles to play in the lives of youth in care which can impact the development of the child (Johnson, 2020; Mires et al., 2018; Plante, 2017). Labella

(2020) focused recommendations on the link of parenting behaviors and the effects of interventions as well as the advantages of placement in foster care. In 2019, Katz and Geiger recommended conducting research on how friendship development and how foster parents can support the development of healthy friendships. Research has shown that a stable home and positive relationships promotes academic excellence, but understanding how to establish these stable, meaningful relationships could positively impact youth in care (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Navarro-Soria et al., 2020; Philyaw, 2020; Plante, 2017).

### III. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the educational experiences among elementary-aged children in foster care in Florida through the perspectives of their foster parents. Although a variety of research viewpoints exist regarding the educational experience of youth in care, much of the research pertains to youth who have already exited care or is focused on a specific topic. A holistic perspective can fill in gaps in the research by providing greater understanding of the connections between the development of various relationships in a child's ecological environment and academic achievement (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Katz & Geiger, 2019; Labella et al., 2020). To gain information regarding the educational experiences of children in care, licensed foster parents in the state of Florida were interviewed regarding an elementary-aged youth who had been in their care for at least four academic months no earlier than 2019. The researcher analyzed transcripts from eight interviews with foster parents licensed in various counties throughout the state of Florida.

#### **Research Framework**

Using a qualitative approach, the researcher implemented an ecological theoretical framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In order to study the educational experience of children in care, the researcher gained information regarding the child's experiences through interviews with foster parents. Interactions between the child and their environment form an integral part of the development of a child (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Children in foster care have faced a disruption of interactions in their ecological environment and, therefore, have a shared experience that can

be studied using a phenomenological approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; van Manen, 2007).

Studying the interactions within the ecological environment of children in foster care generated holistic data to better understand the educational experience of children in care (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

### **The Research Context**

The study took place in Florida, home to more than four million children, where 18% of children are in poverty (Florida Department of Children and Families, 2021). According to the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) from the Children's Bureau (2021), over 24,000 children were in foster care during the year 2021. The average age of a child in care was 7.3 years old (Children's Bureau, 2021). While the Children's Bureau (2021) reported that over 9,000 children were waiting to be adopted, the AFCARS report also states the 49% of case plans have the goal of reunification. Children in foster care in Florida experience an average of 3.85 moves per 1,000 days in foster care, which is less than the national average of 4.12 moves per 1,000 days in foster care (Children's Bureau, 2021).

According to the Annual Performance Report, put out by the Florida Department of Children and Families (2021), 33.44% of the children who had been in care for less than 12 months achieved permanency in 2021. Of the children in 2021 who had been in care for more than 12 months but less than 24 months, 48.99% of them achieved permanency, and of those who have been in care for 24 or more months, 44.61% achieved permanency (Florida Department of Children and Families, 2021). In order to reunify with a parent or primary caretaker, 5,624 children were discharged from foster care, but 3,873 were discharged due to adoption and 2,245 due to guardianship (Children's Bureau, 2021). An additional 750 children aged out of care (Children's Bureau, 2021).

Children entering care due to unsafe circumstances have great potential, but also face challenges (Florida Department of Children and Families, 2019c). Children in foster care have need of stability in order to thrive (Johnson, 2020), and the Florida Department of Children and Families (2019) emphasized that foster parents play an important role in providing stability. To become a foster parent in Florida, interested persons need to attend an orientation, complete foster parent training, complete a background check, and participate in a home inspection and home study (Florida Department of Children and Families, 2019b). Foster parents work alongside a team from the licensing agency to meet the needs of children in care (Florida Department of Children and Families, 2019a, 2019c).

### **The Research Participants**

To understand the educational experience of children in foster care, the researcher interviewed foster parents or previous foster parents in Florida. All participants were currently licensed or had been licensed at the time of placement, which was no earlier than 2019. The foster parents must have taken placement of an elementary-aged child for a duration of at least four academic months in order to participate. Though most of the participants were Caucasian, 25% were Hispanic or Latino. Of the eight participants in the study, two were between the ages of 61 and 70, three were between the ages of 51 and 60, and three were between the ages of 41 and 50. All of the participants were females, and some were married. The participants represented placements from multiple counties in Florida. The participant demographics are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1***Participant Demographics*

Participant	Participant's Age Range	Ethnicity	Range of Years as a Foster Parent
Participant A	41-50	Caucasian	1 Year or Less
Participant B	61-70	Caucasian	More than 3 years but less than 5
Participant C	41-50	Caucasian	More than 1 year but less than 3
Participant D	51-60	Hispanic or Latino	More than 3 years but less than 5
Participant E	51-60	Caucasian	More than 5 years
Participant F	41-50	Caucasian	More than 3 years but less than 5
Participant G	61-70	Hispanic or Latino	More than 5 years
Participant H	51-60	Caucasian	More than 1 year but less than 3

Participant A was a single mother who wants to be a foster parent to help children. At the time of the interview, she was currently licensed in Florida, but had been licensed for less than one year.

Participant B has been fostering for more than three years and started fostering to have children around in her older age. She has had multiple placements of elementary children, and Participant B's first placement was during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participant C was licensed for more than one year. A single mother with one son, she adopted her first placement and became a mother of three.

Participant D had been licensed for more than three years. Along with her husband, Participant D took placement of a child who was in fourth grade.

Participant E has been licensed to foster for more than five years. In 2020, Participant E and her husband took placement of a young boy when he was in first grade.

Participant F, whose mother had been in foster care, became a licensed foster parent in 2018. Having taken multiple placements, Participant F has had long-term placements with a second grader and two kindergarteners.

With at least five years of fostering experience, Participant G participated in the study describing the experiences of her foster son, who was in preschool when first placed and was still placed with Participant G through the beginning of kindergarten.

Lastly, Participant H had been licensed for more than one year, but she and her husband stopped fostering after adopting three boys. Participant H's husband was a licensed mental health counselor, and she was a marriage and family therapist. Both parents understood the need for foster parents from professional experiences.

### **Instruments**

To collect demographic information and confirm that participants met the criteria for participation, each participant completed a Google Form (Appendix A) sent to participants via email. The questions included:

1. Have you received the consent form?
2. Are you currently a licensed foster parent in the state of Florida?
3. Do you have placement or have you had placement of an elementary aged child for at least four academic months?
4. Was this placement no earlier than 2019?
5. What is your age?
6. How long have you been a licensed foster parent?



7. What is your ethnicity?
8. In which county are/were you licensed to foster?

In addition to completing the Google Form, participants participated in a Zoom interview. Zoom also created a transcript of each interview. During the interview, the researcher used the following list of questions (Appendix B):

1. Tell me about your experience becoming a foster parent.
2. Tell me about the elementary aged child that you care for. What educational exceptionalities does your child have?
3. What preparation did you receive to assist children in their educational needs?
4. What is a typical school day experience with your child?
5. What supports are most beneficial to helping your child educationally?

Prompt: Supports could range from family and friends, after school programs, services from the state, or other supports.

6. What barriers exist that hinder your child's academic success?
7. What strategies do you use to overcome those barriers?
8. From your experience with your child's educational care, how would you prepare future foster parents?
9. From your life experiences, what else would you like to contribute regarding the educational experiences of children in foster care?

Before the interview, the researcher read a script to ensure participants knew they were able to stop the interview at any time and able to skip questions. The researcher also ensured participants knew participation was voluntary. The researcher only began the interview after receiving the signed consent form from the participant.

## **Research Process**

After obtaining IRB approval, the researcher began seeking out participants. To obtain participants, the researcher primarily utilized Facebook groups of foster parents in Florida and posted regarding the study (Appendix C). Of the people who responded, the researcher communicated to ensure the participants met the criteria for the study: currently or recently licensed to foster in the state of Florida and have had placement of an elementary-aged child for at least four academic months with the placement being no earlier than 2019. To communicate most effectively, the researcher utilized the social media platform to obtain phone numbers of interested potential participants. Additionally, the researcher communicated with a member of a licensing agency in Florida to seek additional participants. The researcher also called the additional participants to ensure the participants met the criteria for the study.

During the phone call to ensure participants met the criteria for the study, the researcher also explained the process of the research, i.e., the Google Form and the Zoom interview, and the consent form (Appendix D). Once the participant agreed to the research process, the researcher emailed them the Google Form link and the consent form. Then, the researcher scheduled the Zoom interview and sent the links needed to complete the interview. Upon receipt of the consent form, the researcher was able to complete the interviews.

After the interview was complete, the verification process was explained. The researcher finalized the transcript of the interview by listening to the Zoom recording then reviewing and editing the transcript created by Zoom. After sending that transcript via email to the participants, the researcher waited for a reply; if a participant did not respond, the researcher used an additional communication method to ensure the participant could validate the transcript. If a participant noted a change needed to be made to the transcript, the transcript was updated and

sent back to the participant for verification. The researcher did not analyze the transcripts until all were verified by the participants.

### **Data Analysis**

Once all transcripts were validated, the researcher reread them. Once the researcher understood the story told by each interview, each statement was labeled with a code. Then, the transcripts were cross-coded to determine common threads of the interviews to develop categories. Upon review of the categories, the researcher identified five themes. The researcher used the process of lean coding, relying on a small number of themes but allowing relevant ideas to build through the process of analyzing the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Throughout the coding process, the researcher determined which statements were significant. The researcher used the significant statements and the themes to develop an understanding of the educational experience of children in foster care.

### **Summary**

This chapter detailed the processes used to study the educational experiences of children in foster care through phenomenological research. The children in foster care shared a unique experience entering foster care and simultaneously progressing educationally. Participants voluntarily completed Zoom interviews providing insight into the educational experiences of children in foster care. Using the responses to the interview questions, the researcher ascertained what themes emerged from the data.

## IV. RESULTS

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the educational experiences among elementary-aged children in foster care in Florida through the perspectives of their foster parents. In this study, educational experience was generally defined as all experiences related to the academic progress of the child. The researcher coded the transcripts from the interviews, and the codes were collapsed into comparable topics. From the topics, the themes emerged. The themes provide the essence of the educational experience of a child in foster care from the perspective of a foster parent.

### **Sample Characteristics**

All participants in the study were licensed foster parents in the state of Florida at the time they took custody of an elementary-aged child. Additionally, each participant had placement of an elementary-aged child in foster care in the year 2019 or later. At least one of the placements of the participant had to be for four academic months or longer. Within those parameters, the placement outcomes for the child varied from reunification to placement with a relative to adoption. In some cases, the final outcome was unknown, as the case was ongoing.

Participant A became a foster parent in order to help children. She wanted to be a positive role model, and as she stated that her mother taught her, “Family is not always blood.” Participant A fostered a young girl, who was with her from the middle of kindergarten into the beginning of first grade. This young girl was still placed with Participant A at the time of the interview.

Beginning for a different reason, Participant B stated, “I’ve got a lot of time on my hands, and I would like to, you know, have kids around me.” However, she began to see fostering as an act of service to her community. Her motivation is to help foster children to develop better. Though she has had multiple placements of elementary children, Participant B’s first placement was during the COVID-19 pandemic.

After having a child, Participant C became a single mother. Her experience helped her to think about children who do not have anybody to care for them. She decided to foster in order to help children. Participant C has fostered multiple children and adopted her first placement, a brother and a sister. The children were six and seven years old when they moved into Participant C’s home.

“We feel called by God to help kids that come from hard places,” stated Participant D, referring to her husband and herself. Before they began fostering, they adopted a boy. They became licensed to foster in late 2019 and took in a placement in early 2020. Participant D and her husband were fostering a fourth-grade girl at the time of the interview who was in third grade when initially placed in their home.

Participant E began looking into fostering at the age of 18. Although she was unable to begin fostering at that time, she did not forget her desire to foster. Participant E and her husband already had three children, but before turning 50, both parents committed the time to finish training and became licensed. At the beginning of 2020, they took placement of an elementary-aged boy.

The mother of Participant F spent time in the foster care system as a child. Participant F decided to become a foster parent to create her own family, desiring to care for children. She has

had three separate placements, two with students beginning in kindergarten and entering first grade and one with a student in second grade.

Before becoming a licensed foster parent to care for local children, Participant G had experience fostering undocumented children through a different agency. In her time fostering, she has taken placement of 21 children. The ages of the children varied, including six months old, preschool aged, and six years old. She stated, “I’m retired, so I spend a lot of time with them.” At various points in the interview, her deep emotions were apparent as she reflected on her memories with the children in her care.

Participant H is a licensed marriage and family therapist, and her husband is a licensed mental health counselor. Due to their experiences in their professions, both parents understood the need for foster homes. When their children were older, they decided to become licensed foster parents. Participant H stated, “We took placement of three biological brothers at the same time. At the time, the youngest was four and the oldest was seven and the middle child was six.”

### **Data Analysis Process**

After conducting the interviews, the researcher verified the validity of the transcripts. First, the researcher reviewed the transcript created by Zoom to correct any transcription errors. Then, the researcher emailed the corrected transcripts to the participants who had the opportunity to make corrections. If the participant did not respond in a timely manner, the researcher communicated again to ensure each transcript was verified. When a participant found errors, the transcripts were corrected and resubmitted the transcript for final verification. Data analysis did not begin until participants validated the transcripts.

Once all transcripts contained verified data, the researcher reread all the transcripts, becoming familiar with the experiences of each participant. After rereading the transcripts again,

statements of the participant received codes. Each coded statement was copied into an Excel spreadsheet where the statement was labeled with a code. A note on the side explained, justified, or clarified each code.

**Table 2**

*Distinct Transcript Codes*

Participant Letter	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
Number of distinct codes	22	24	26	30	23	29	27	22

After all transcripts were coded, the researcher went through each spreadsheet and cross-coded, double-coding statements if the statement was highly applicable to more than one code. Table 2 shows the initial number of distinct codes used to code each statement of the transcript of each participant.

After reviewing each spreadsheet, the researcher collapsed the codes. The codes were aligned so that the topics in common among all interviews were grouped together. The collapsed codes included behaviors, communication and interaction with schools, influence of birth family and past, agency communication, services and supports, lack of preparation, IEP (individualized education plan) and ADHD, motivation for fostering and experience fostering, routine and structure, educational challenges, helping meet the need of children, advocacy, types of schools, general challenges, time, identifying needs and needs of children in care.

Upon reviewing the collapsed codes, the following five themes emerged: challenges, meeting needs, deficiencies, support system, and behaviors of foster parents.

## **Findings by Research Question**

Every child in foster care experiences many different phenomena, and every elementary-aged child in care experiences educational phenomena. In order to gain insight into the education of children in care, foster parents shared the experiences of elementary children placed in their home. Though the experiences vary greatly in terms of duration and success, many elements of the experiences remain consistent. Because the interviewees were all foster parents, the information provided also offers insight into the values and behaviors of foster parents. Although the backgrounds and experiences of foster parents varied, common elements appeared throughout the data analysis process. Foster parents play a critical role in the life of children in care, and understanding the experiences of foster parents provides insight into the education of children in care.

### **Research Question 1**

What are the educational experiences of elementary-aged children in foster care from the perspective of foster parents?

The educational experiences of a child in foster care include challenges, needs, and support. Each child faces struggles that hinder the ability to make academic progress. The system, which is intended to provide what would help children in care overcome struggles, often fails to provide the needed help. However, much support exists to help children in foster care experience an enriched education. Despite the hindrances, foster parents provide support and assistance to help meet the educational needs of children in foster care and overcome the challenges children in foster care face.

The educational challenges children in foster care experience vary greatly from school truancy to the neurological effects of trauma. Not every child in care struggles to achieve



academically, but all of them have endured trauma. Participant D stated that trauma, “affects their brain, affects their development, affects the way that they see the world, their ability to learn.” It can take time for a foster parent to unravel the trauma a child has gone through and to understand the underlying causes of struggles and behaviors. Not only have children come from various backgrounds and experiences different traumatic events, but each child also responds differently to those experiences. Each child in care faces challenges during their educational experiences.

Additionally, each child in care has educational needs. Children need to connect with a safe adult, and the development of a safe connection can take time. Developing routines and structures can help children in care to feel stable. Foster parents invest significant time and energy to meeting the needs of children in care. For some children in care, the traditional public-school setting does not adequately meet the academic needs. The needs of some children may be met in a different environment, such as a private school, or through accommodations provided by a public school. Children in care have needs that can hinder academic progress if unmet.

Although much support exists to help children in care, the support of the foster parent is significant. The foster parent advocates for the needs of the child in care and can connect the child to additional support. Support for the child may include agency-driven support such as counseling or testing services. However, children often benefit from other supports such as tutoring or extracurricular activities. Other members of the community, such as extended family of the foster parent or neighbors can also provide support to a child in care. The foster parent plays a crucial role in connecting a child to helpful services.

Children in care experience support to meet academic needs and to overcome challenges. Although children in care may be placed into new positive environments, manifesting the

benefits of the new environment takes time and intentionality. Children take time to learn, grow, and develop. Meeting the needs of children in care takes time, and the supports children need require longevity to overcome challenges.

## **Research Question 2**

How are foster parents prepared to assist children in foster care in their educational experience?

Foster parents prepare themselves to assist children in their educational experiences. The unfortunate reality is the system intended to help children in care has many deficiencies. Many children need support from the agency that it cannot provide, and so do many foster parents. However, foster parents communicate, connect, and advocate. Foster parents take the initiative to learn how to meet the needs of children in their care whether or not the agency is able to support them.

Understanding the particular needs of children in care is difficult. “Making correct identification of their needs is hard to do, and it takes a while, so you can't really do it at intake in the foster care system,” shared Participant B. The foster care system removes children from unsafe situations, but the agency removing the children is not able to provide the information foster parents often desire. In many cases, the agency does not know all the trauma the child has faced, or all the educational challenges a child has been through, so the foster parent does not know either. The agency does not have all the resources to adequately communicate information to parents. Participant F shared of agency staff members, “Some are knowledgeable of some things, and some are not.” When a foster parent needs to meet a need of a child, the agency is not always able to quickly diagnose and provide service for the child.

Despite the deficiencies of the system, foster parents learn the skills needed to meet the need of children in care. Foster parents invest time into taking training courses or communicating with other foster parents. The communication between the home, the school, and the agency is important to foster parents. Additionally, foster parents invest meaningful time into developing relationships with the children in their care. Foster parents believe in the future success of children in care, so the foster parents are willing to develop the skill of advocacy for children in care.

Regardless of the amount of preparation a foster parent receives, the foster parent will work to meet as many of the needs as they can on behalf of children in their care. None of the foster parents received adequate training to meet the educational needs of children in care, but they do not allow the lack of preparation to become a hindrance. Rather, foster parents were willing to push the status quo and to communicate on behalf of the foster child even when their message was unwelcome. The foster parents took responsibility for the needs of children in their care and sought answers, help, and support.

### **Data Analysis Results**

The themes in the study described the essential factors of the educational experiences of elementary-aged children in foster care from the perspective of the foster parent. Though each story of a child is unique, the collective experiences provided insight into the life of an elementary-aged child in foster care and the realities faced by the caretaker. In the collective experiences, the researcher found the following five themes: challenges, meeting needs, deficiencies, support system, and behaviors of foster parents.

## Challenges

A student entering foster care faces a variety of challenges, and though each student carries experiences differently, each child comes with influences from their pasts. The influences from the past may include birth parent relationships or the memories of past trauma, which could include the influences of visitation or the attitudes picked up from previous households. The past carries an influence in the life of a child and can create hindrances to academic progress.

The attitudes of the birth family can affect the attitudes of the children in care. Participant A dealt with many significant behaviors from the child in her care. The young girl in her care lied, cheated, and stole, leading to difficulties in the classroom. The child was behind academically and struggling socially. However, in reference to the child's birth mother, she stated, "Her mom doesn't care if she is bad." Participant A additionally explained, "Her mom pushes certain things on her, and she just will tell a story."

The influence of the birth family's beliefs about school can also influence a child's view of education. Participant F said, "Some of my children come from family values that don't necessarily value education." Participant F even went on to explain one 10-year-old child placed with her who viewed police as an enemy and did not view school as a place to prepare for the future. Likewise Participant B shared, "A lot of these kids that are in this foster situation don't get academics at home." The mindset a child has been taught by the birth family influences the behaviors of the child in the foster home.

Additionally, the behaviors of the birth family affect the child's academic progress. For example, many children coming into foster care are behind academically because of how much school they missed while living with the birth family. Discussing her current placement, Participant A shared, "I found out from her dad that her mom wouldn't send her to school if her

hair was not done.” The young girl placed with Participant D was behind academically and was in fourth grade. Participant D stated, “I was able to get into her record from school, and she missed close to a year in school.” The absences acquired often put children in care below grade level.

The neglect of the birth family to have regular interactions and communications with a child can hinder their academic abilities. For example, Participant G discussed the challenges faced by her kindergarten boy. The child came into care when he was 5 years old, and he did not know any English. Even when speaking in his native language, he had significant gaps in his knowledge. Participant G explained: “Well, he is behind, because even with his own language nobody taught him the numbers, nobody taught him the colors, or shapes.” She elaborated, “He couldn't say the word yellow in Spanish.” Skills that a child may normally acquire in routine conversations with an adult must be taught at a later age if the birth family never took the time to engage in those conversations.

A child's past in foster care may also include trauma, abuse, or neglect. Every child in foster care experiences some magnitude of trauma, as every child in foster care experiences removal. However, other children carry greater levels of trauma due to the circumstances of the past. Participant D shared the importance of “knowing how to help these kids that come from hard places, that their brain is not working properly because of the trauma that they're enduring.” Speaking of her son, adopted through foster care, Participant C described the impact of trauma on his brain, stating,

The way it was explained to me is that he forgets everything because his brain doesn't recognize the difference between stress from, ‘Oh, I can't figure out this math problem,’

to the trauma stress, he had before. So, he just like freezes, and that's kind of his response.

The impact of the trauma on the brain of Participant C's son created great challenges in learning and retaining new information.

The influence of the past may be external rather than internal. Participant H took in three boys who had been in a previous foster home. Describing them when they first moved in, Participant H stated, "Their shoes were old and had holes, and their clothes were ill-fitting, and their hair wasn't done, and I think they were treated with less regard." The foster parent explained the school had treated them with less regard because they appeared not to be cared for. The negative interactions at school affected the desire of the boys to attend school. For a while, the young boys were reluctant to go to school.

Due to the complex circumstances of a child's past, identifying the needs of a child can be challenging. The needs of a child can vary greatly. Participant C shared of the children in her care:

They're all individuals, so I have three completely different kids in my home. I have one who just needed a little stability and she's taken off. I have one that will never take off to that academic level. I have one that is behaviorally his own worst enemy.

Understanding the needs requires involvement. Participant C also stated, "I just try to be involved and really understand what their individual needs are." The process takes time, as described by Participant B, "You have to give these kids time for the personality to show. Then you can tell what's wrong and what you need to work on." It takes time to identify the needs of each individual child.

Participant F described the process of identifying needs. She said:

I mean, when you have a child dropped off at your door, they're kind of a packaged layer, and you have to internally dissect those layers of what their interests are, what their strengths are, what their weaknesses are, what their fears are, what they came from, how are they gonna transition into a different environment, how can you help them understand what's going on because they're little people with big emotions. So, there's a lot of unpacking that you have to do, and that just takes patience, time and grace.

Observing the children and giving them time helps foster parents to identify needs.

Even after identifying a need, knowing how to respond can be unclear or difficult. For example, Participant C had a child diagnosed with a non-specified learning disability. However, when asked about the diagnosis, she was not able to explain the meaning of it. Administering medications can be challenging. Participant B sought medication for her child in care. She complained, "I've got one with ADHD, and it took me six months to get medication for him, which should have taken three months." Coming into care, a child may not be on an effective medication or may have been prescribed a medication that had been misused by the birth family. Participant C explained the birth family's handling of a psychotropic prescription for a 10-year-old boy in her care, "The drugs were misused, including his own drugs and medication, so I don't know to what degree he was taking them or not taking them." Upon noticing unusual effects of the medication while he was in her home, Participant C had the child's prescription changed. Even though the diagnosis was clear, responding in the best way for the child was challenging.

Participant E had difficulty identifying the needs of her first-grade student, but also had challenges responding to his needs. The foster parent noticed the first-grader was often angry after school, but Participant E said, "He really couldn't communicate to me like how his day was, and I didn't know was that because of what the situation at his home or the situation at school?"

Or was he just angry?” Upon observation at the school, she determined the public school was not a good fit, but she was unable to change schools. The agency denied her request to move him to a different school. Due to the pandemic, the school switched to online learning. This change was a negative experience for the child in her care. “And he did online school till probably end of April when I realized this just isn't working, he was not getting anything from it,” Participant E explained. The agency still hesitated to allow Participant E to enroll her student in a private school, even though she had accurately identified his need and found a more suitable school.

Whether or not a child in care ever has a diagnosis, they may exhibit unusual or challenging behaviors. A huge component of a child’s behavior is the ability to self-regulate. As stated by Participant D, “A kid who doesn't self-regulate, it's a disaster anywhere they go.” Participant C explained various behaviors from children in her home such as inattention, anger, or manipulation. She also said:

You have to have a level of empathy for them, cause it gets tough when you're getting those calls, and they're in trouble, and the teachers telling you things that you've never heard teachers say before, like you know, it gets tough.

When children have a lack of discipline or a lack of proper social behaviors, it can prevent academic progress. Participant B said, “Well, some of the kids have behavioral problems that interfere with their ability to get a good education.” The challenging behaviors can hinder a child’s academic progress.

Children in care may struggle adjusting to academic routines. For Participant G, difficulties began with the idea of attending school because her sons were reluctant to go to school. Likewise, Participant C explained that it took time for her children to get used to attending school every weekday. Participant G also described the difficulties of completing



homework with her three sons, stating “But once we would get home, the hardest time really was around homework time.” Participant G went on to describe the challenges, “so homework time would result sometimes in tantruming, crying, and bawling on the floor and rolling under the table.” Entering the routine of attending school daily and completing homework was a difficult adjustment.

For other children, academic challenges may include difficulties with peers. The kindergarten student of Participant G faced bullying at school. The child was a very petite student and would be teased for his physical size. In describing her 9-year-old child in care, Participant D said, “She is socially awkward because she's learning the social rules, again because of her background.” Children in care may not have experienced healthy social interaction or been taught how to participate socially in a positive way. Participant A, speaking of her first-grade placement, stated, “She has no friends. They don't want to play with her.” Social interactions can be a challenging part of school for a child who has differences in appearance or who has not developed effective social behavior.

### **Meeting Needs**

Meeting the needs of children in care takes time. As stated by Participant B, “Fostering takes a lot of time, and I think that's one reason why people don't do it.” Many participants described the progress children made over time. Participant D said of her fourth-grade daughter in care, “She's maturing. She feels safe in this house, in spite of all this stuff that's going on. So, we see the improvement.” Describing her three sons, Participant H expressed, “It took probably that first half year to kind of get everything in place, but they have been honor-roll students every single semester.” Investing time into the development of a child yields positive results for this child.

Investing time into the children in care enables foster parents to establish connections. “You have to really be in tune with your kids it's just a connection. It's a bond,” Participant C explained. Participant D described the difficulty of teaching her fourth-grade child to behave well in school. She stated, “So, I felt pressure from the school to give consequences, and I wasted all the time with consequences when this little girl needed more connections.” Participant D participated in many trainings regarding responses to trauma. The training is trust based relational intervention (TBRI). “We use this at home every day,” Participant D shared regarding TBRI practices. Consistently utilizing effective practices benefited the child in her home.

For other families, developing connections involved shared experiences. Participant H described connecting with her three sons. “They were home with us for the summer. Vacationed for the first time. Learned to swim. They could swim at that point, but not well. And we just did fun kind of family bonding stuff.” For her sons, developing connections extended beyond connecting with the foster parents. “And one of their little friends in our neighborhood, his mom was a teacher at the school, so they really began to have some connections, and, and really, really had a phenomenal, second great year,” said Participant H, explaining the transition into a new school for the second year.

Participant G shared about the importance of connection to her personally. She was emotional describing the two children in her care because one was about to be reunified to the same home as her siblings. Participant G reflected on the time she had with them and the important elements of fostering children, sharing, “They are not going to remember my name, and they're not going to remember, who I was, but they are going to remember things that I did with them. They're going to remember little things.” Each memory formed that helped develop a

bond was time well spent. Beyond desiring to influence a child educationally, she wanted the child to be loved. As Participant G stated, “Not everybody can give true love.”

Over long periods of time, families develop connections and see progress, but families also establish routines. Many routines of participants included consistent wake up times and bedtimes. Many routines included tasks for the children to accomplish, such as educational tasks like reading or developmental tasks like brushing teeth. When describing things that have helped her first-grade child, Participant A said, “Keeping a routine. It is important for her. It gives her structure.” Likewise, when Participant C described strategies for overcoming barriers, she stated, “It's structure, like, they have to have structure.” Structure and routine can also include consistently attending school. Consistency provides the opportunity for children in care to thrive. Describing her 10-year-old son in care, Participant C said, “He's grown tremendously, and a lot of that just goes to the fact that he's no longer truant.” Routines allow children to become secure and to make progress.

The routines established by foster parents include many educational activities, such as homework time, but it may also include logistical elements like driving. For example, Participant B stated, “Now I work with them on their homework.” Participant C described spending time with the children in her home attending to homework, and went on to say, “You really have to want to take the time to do things educationally.” Though educational activities are important, so are routine items like driving. Participant H shared, “We drove about 35, 40 minutes each morning and afternoon to keep them in the same school for the remainder of that school year.” Participant H chose to keep her sons in the same school to reduce the number of changes they experienced at once, and her time spent provided her sons with a smoother transition.

To best meet needs, foster parents may enroll a child in a non-public school. Participant E chose private school for her second-grade student. Before moving to a private school, she observed his anger when she picked him up from public school. She also observed chaotic dynamics in his public-school classroom and a poor learning environment. In her words, “I realized that certain kids were grouped together based upon what was their perceived learning potential.” Participant E repeatedly petitioned to move him to private school, and the petition was eventually accepted. “So, we found the school that we wanted him in, and he thrived,” Participant E stated. Participant E also described the child’s social life in the private school, saying, “He’s got tons of friends in his little school.” Reflecting on what would have happened had the petition been denied again, she said, “He probably would be below grade level, his confidence would be down.” Participant E chose a private school for the child to provide him with the best possible experience, paying out of pocket what Step-Up for Students would not cover.

Likewise, Participant G chose a private school for her kindergarten student. Private school also required a financial investment from the foster parent. She said, “I chose to send him to a private school even though the agency and the scholarship that I got was not 100%.” At first, Participant G did not know that children in foster care could attend private school. Participant G was eager to enroll the child in private school once she was aware of that option. “I learned the same date, and I started filling out the forms to apply for the scholarship,” she said. Participant G valued choosing the right school for her kindergartener in care.

Although not by choice, Participant B sent her 7-year-old student to a specialized school. The child had been expelled from the mainstream school before coming into Participant B’s care. The school told Participant B to enroll the child in the specialized school, which benefitted the

young boy in her care. As she stated, “There were only 8 kids in the class, and they had a lot of individual attention.” The specialized school was better able to accommodate the child’s needs. “That’s specialized for children with needs and they provided him with an IEP and all kinds of accommodations,” Participant B described. She gave an example, “He would experience anxiety just getting on the school bus, so they put a monitor on the school bus to sit with him.” Enrolling a student in a school that meets his needs makes a difference in the educational experience of an elementary student in care.

### **Deficiencies**

Many hindrances exist within the foster care system that make meeting needs challenging. Hindrances included challenges such as the emotional turmoil faced by the foster family and the lack of freedom to make important decisions. Other challenges included the inability of schools to meet the educational needs of the children in care and the lack of preparation foster parents received from the agency. Some hindrances prevented educational needs from being met.

Even the process to become a foster parent can be challenging. Participant A described the process of becoming a foster parent as long and intimidating, even detailing that she “was almost scared away from fostering.” The amount of time and scheduling required for training can prevent people from becoming licensed. Participant E shared, “I think it was 40 hours of training we had to do.” The process was not intimidating to all, however. Participant H said, “It was a fairly easy process for us,” but she did also explain that when her and her husband were younger, they “decided at that point it just really wasn’t feasible for us.” When their children were older, Participant H and her husband became licensed to foster.

Despite the variety of experiences, all the foster parents stated they were not prepared to meet the educational needs of the children in care. Participant A answered “none” when asked what preparation she received to assist children in their educational needs. Similarly, Participant B responded, “None, you know, I had to learn as I went along.” Participant C stated, “I wasn't really prepared. It was kind of, honestly, learn as you go.” Speaking of her fostering experience, Participant D explained, “And, you know, of course, it's not the same when you're taking the training and you're getting all that information; the reality is totally different.” When asked about what preparation she received, Participant E stated, “Really nothing,” and Participant F said, “I mean nothing really.” When Participant G was asked about the preparations she received, she detailed waiting to have a case manager for her case. In reference to the trainings, Participant H stated, “I don't feel like we received a lot of preparation.” None of the participants felt the agency prepared them to meet the educational needs of the children in care.

The agency may want to provide more support, but they are not always able. Participant G explained some of the limitations of the agency. Participant G described the process of the police and the investigator removing the child from the birth family. The day the child comes into care, the agency may have little information to provide. Participant G said, “They don't know anything about the child.” Participant B said, “The foster care people do the best they can. They really do.” She went on to describe the burden on the case manager, “I mean they've got one case manager who may have 30 kids, right? I mean, how do you do that?” Although the foster family could use more information or communication, the case managers are rarely able to provide useful information.

Schools are often unable to meet the needs of children in care. Participant D sent her third-grade daughter in care to public school. She faced academic challenges due to her

background and to many previous absences from school. Participant D said, “She is so behind, like she started really, really behind.” The school did not understand the challenges faced by a child in foster care. Speaking of the school, Participant D shared, “They want to treat my daughter like she's just a difficult child,” and “they just wanna say, oh, she's an attention seeker.” While communicating with various staff at the school, Participant D could feel the lack of preparation the school had for children going through trauma. She explained:

Knowing how to help these kids that come from hard places, that their brain is not working properly because of the trauma that they're enduring, that they're going through, and having the right practitioners, caregivers, teachers that have tools, and unfortunately, teachers don't have the tools.

The lack of understanding regarding the behaviors of children who have been through trauma can leave a foster family feeling unsupported.

Families who enroll a child in public school can face challenges obtaining an IEP. When Participant H took placement of three boys, none of them had an IEP even though they had clear educational delays. Before being placed with Participant H, the boys were in a different foster home. In explaining why the IEP process may not have been initiated, Participant H said, “My assumption is, maybe it's because if a child is in foster care, the foster family needs to be involved in that and pushing for that, but also the case manager as the legal guardian has to be a part of that, so maybe that's a system that's hard to navigate.” Later, Participant H met with a long-term substitute who was not using the accommodations for her son in care. When she had a conversation with the long-term substitute, she found out “she just wasn't aware.” Initiating the IEP process and ensuring accommodations are being used can be challenging for foster parents.

Other foster parents are unable to obtain desired accommodations. Participant D attempted to obtain an IEP for her third-grade daughter in care. Participant D communicated with the pediatrician and with the school, but the school felt they did not have enough information. The foster mom did not agree with the reasoning of the school and explained:

It's ridiculous, even though she's so behind in all the assessments that she took, it was at the level of kindergarten and first grade, a third grader, right? And even though the behavior was not the correct one, for some reason she didn't qualify because, if they were gonna do it by behavior, she was wasn't being as aggressive. It would not justify that. And academically, she was making a little progress, so as long as she's making progress, that's what they said. She doesn't qualify.

Because the child was making progress, the school would not provide the IEP. The foster parent felt frustrated because the child faced significant learning gaps and needed additional support.

Public school may not be the best fit for a student. When Participant E observed her first-grade student in public school, she noticed the classroom did not provide instructions and rules. The student was on an academic plan, and the foster parent thought the child would need to be retained. However, when the foster parent found a better school for the child in care, the agency would not approve the child to switch schools. In the words of Participant E, the agency, "felt that he had too many changes in his life already with his family, his mother. He needed some consistency." Participant E kept him in public school for a time. When asked about educational barriers, Participant E said, "Not being allowed to put him in the school that I thought he should be in." During the summer, the foster parent requested again to move the child to a private school. Although a tense conversation occurred, the agency relented the previous stance and



allowed the student to attend private school. Reflecting on the process, Participant E said of foster parents, “We should be able to have more of the input of what we feel is right for them.” The switch to a private school allowed the second-grade student to thrive.

Not every family has the means to enroll a child in foster care in a private school. Many foster parents are unaware that private school is an option for children in care. Participant G found out about the Step-Up scholarship program at a seminar and immediately applied. After the seminar, the foster parent used the Step-Up program but also carried some of the financial burden. Participant H helped to cover the private tuition for children in her care. She detailed, “His school is less than \$8,000, so we covered the other \$1,000, but I'm sure that there's some families that can't cover that \$1,000, and most private schools are a lot more than that.”

Participant H also explained a previous placement who used a Step-Up scholarship:

Our other child that we had, we put them in a private school for kindergarten, and it was double what Step-Up was. But it was his best year ever, and he, you know, it was worth it for him. He had a good start.

Even though a private school can be the optimal placement for a child, private education carries a financial burden and is not accessible for all children in care.

Specialized schools may be available in some cases. Participant B sent her 7-year-old to a specialized school. When the foster parent went to enroll the child in a traditional school, they said, “We are not set up here for children with behavioral problems.” The foster child in care had previously been expelled while living with his birth family. The specialized school, recommended by the mainstream school, was able to offer him support. Participant B explained, “That's specialized for children with needs, and they provided him with an IEP and all kinds of accommodations.” The 7-year-old student made great progress due to the smaller size of the

school and the school's ability to accommodate the child's needs. "He was making friends, and he was doing things that he had never done before because he had always been in trouble at regular mainstream school," Participant B explained. The school was able to provide special accommodations like a transportation monitor on the bus. The accommodations greatly benefited a young student who otherwise would have had a challenging year.

Poor communication from the foster care agency can prevent needs from being met. The licensing experience can leave potential foster parents with misconceptions of fostering. Participant A stated, "The person doing the home study made fostering out to be a certain way that it turned out not to be." When foster parents are scared away from fostering, fewer homes are available to children who need them. Comparing training and fostering, Participant F shared, "In theory everything is great, but in life application, it's absolute chaos." Getting useful, accurate preparation from the agency can be challenging.

Participant F experienced high turnover with case management and experienced several new structures. The foster parent detailed, "For one of my children, I've had about 17 case managers." Participant F also stated:

There's a lot of different situations and scenarios that happen between case plans and children, as well as their needs, and a lot of their needs may or may not be met, and it might be due to lack of resources, such as case managers or knowledgeable people or people not knowing how to connect with other people.

The inability to communicate with a competent case manager can prevent a child in care from receiving the support they need.

## Support System

An effective support system can make a significant difference to a foster family. Support systems may include family members, schools support, community engagement, agency services, or other types of support. By engaging with the community, foster parents enrich the lives of the children in their care. The extra supports benefit the academic experiences of children in foster care.

Some financial supports are available to all foster families from the state of Florida. Families receive a stipend for each child in their care, and children in care receive Medicaid. Other supports exist, such as Step-Up tuition that is available for children in foster care to use to attend private schools. Participant E provided information about additional financial support, saying:

Now DeSantis has done some things recently, like when we have to overpay for daycare, we now get up to \$200 reimbursed of the extra that comes out of our funds, so that's been huge. I mean the families are ecstatic about that.

The state's financial provision helps foster parents to provide for the needs of children in care.

The agency provides additional supports. Participant A needed support due to the difficult behaviors of the first-grade student in her care. Because of the behaviors, Participant A "told the agency that the only way we can keep her is if they provide all the services, counseling, tutoring." The foster parent later explained, "It took a while, but they are providing services." Services may include testing or therapy. Participant H said of her pre-school aged child, "He had speech therapy, and I think had been tested for some for some delays." However, some services required from the agency are not beneficial. Participant E shared, "Counseling is always tough for the little ones." Participant E also explained, "I'm not sure they get anything from it."

Whether support is requested by the family or required by the agency, services are available through the agency including testing, counseling, and therapy.

In addition to support from the agency, many schools offer support to help students in care. Participant C made use of summer school where classes are smaller and made use of tutoring services offered through the school her student attended. Participant C stated:

I find that the tutoring offered at the school is most beneficial just because they all know where the child stands, where the child struggles, what he needs to work on, and it's also geared toward their actual curriculum and teaching methods.

Additionally, the foster parent explained that summer school is “where a lot of the gap is closed.” The supports available to students in the school helped Participant C meet the needs of the children in her care.

Other schools can help when they develop relationships with the students and families. Although the child Participant E cared for reunified with his birth mother, the foster parent maintained a relationship with him through his school. Participant E explained, “The school’s close to my house. I can check on him. I bring him lunches twice a week.” The school also developed a positive relationship with the second-grade student’s birth mother. “They pour into Mom, you know. They make her feel, never like she's doing something wrong,” Participant E explained. The support from the private school continued for the student and family after transitioning back to his birth family.

Many churches support foster families by meeting practical needs. Participant B shared, “We've been adopted by a local church, and they bring us a meal every week. They provide babysitting services.” Other churches meet additional needs. For example, Participant D’s church “is very hands on in the community, and they have a very strong ministry with adoption and

foster care and just in general for kids that come from hard places.” Participant D received TBRI training in her church. Participant D stated, “I think that the first one was in 2018, so every year they do a refresher or another level of that.” Churches can provide a community to foster parents and can meet a variety of tangible needs.

Other community groups also exist to help support foster families. Networks of local foster parents exist to help answer questions and provide support in challenging situations. Participant B shared about these networks, “There are avenues out there that if you need help you can find it.” Participant D emphasized the benefits of communicating with a network when she said, “We need to learn, and if we don't know something we need to get out of our comfort zone and start going to places, researching, calling people.” Participant G benefitted from contacting a support group; she stated, “And even when I need the respite, they gave me the name of a person who could help.” Community support groups help foster parents to meet immediate needs and answer pressing questions.

Community supports can also meet other needs. Participant G shared that one organization “provides you with diapers, if you need them. Once a month, they will deliver you a box of diapers if you have young ones in diapers.” Participant G went on to describe the food and cleaning products that the organization delivers. Another organization can meet educational needs and enrichment needs. For example, Participant E used funds from the organization to pay for swim lessons. Participant E said that she tried to ensure all of her “kids know how to swim by the time they leave here.” Community organizations can meet tangible needs for the family and provide enrichment for the children in care.

A local organization provided tutoring for many students. For many families, Participant B shared, “private tutoring is too expensive.” When an organization can provide a tutor, an

educational need is met for a child in care. Participant D shared “It helps a lot when a person who doesn't live with the kid is helping.” Participant E spoke highly of her kindergartener’s tutor; “Oh, his tutor! She was great.” Additionally, Participant G stated, “I think what's been supporting us is the tutor because at least this way I don't have to keep arguing with him to study.” Many families benefited from a tutor coming into the home to provide educational support to the child in care.

Many families found support through additional programs, such as extracurricular activities. Participant E spoke about finding enrichment opportunities, “I just look out in the community.” She also spoke about placements who had participated in soccer or in basketball camps. Participant F shared, “We also have educational or extracurricular activities.” Discussing swim classes and baseball playoffs, Participant F shared about the activities the children in her home participate in. Participant G also placed children in her care in extracurricular activities. Her kindergartener played soccer. Participant G did say, however, “It didn’t help with his education.” Whether it influences educational goals or not, extracurricular programs can be an important piece of structure and routine for a child in care.

Extended relationships provide support for many families. For example, Participant F found support in her neighborhood. Participant F said, “The neighborhood kids will go outside, and they'll play and the older kids will read and talk to the kids and you know read things along with them.” Participant C described the way her family supports each other. “My biological son is a busy kid, but he's smart, and he has straight A's and he's honor-roll, and he will take time to read,” Participant C shared. Family support also helps Participant F. Participant F said, “Same thing with my family. The first thing we do when we see each other is like, what did you learn today?” The family discussions allow them to support one another.

## **Behaviors of Foster Parents**

Even if the challenges, needs, and deficiencies outweigh the support available, the behavior of the foster parents can help a child overcome difficulties. A foster parent's belief in the child can propel the child toward progress. Likewise, time spent connecting and developing a strong relationship can change the educational progress of a child. A foster parent may also spend time communicating about the education of a child and advocating for their needs. The behaviors exhibited by the foster parent influence the way a child navigates through educational experiences.

Though a child in care may have significant educational deficiencies, a foster parent can see the positive attributes of a child. Participant C described the negative effects trauma played in hindering a child in her care. The 10-year-old child struggled to retain information. However, Participant C also stated, "The will is there, the work ethic is there. His behavior is amazing." The foster parent also said, "Not everybody's gonna go to college. Not everybody is going to be a doctor; you know it takes a lot of different people, and I think regardless, I know he's gonna be successful." Although the child may not perform well academically, Participant C knows he can live a successful and accomplished life.

In addition to seeing positive qualities, foster parents can speak positive words to the children in their home. Participant F shared that she communicates with the children in her home to make them feel safe. Participant F said, "I don't know how many times I've said that. You're safe. You're protected. You're loved." Participant G values loving the children in her home above education. Participant G explained, "But I think for them to know that they were loved while they were here. That, to me, is more important than they walk away knowing education."

Foster parents ensure the children in their home are safe and cared for, regardless of academic performance.

Foster parents invest time into developing a relationship with the child in their care. Participant G explained, "I'm retired, so I spend a lot of time with them. I dedicate myself to them. I was just telling somebody. Everything I do is for them. There's no longer me." Fostering requires a lot of time. Participant C said, "You have to really be in tune with your kids; it's just a connection. It's a bond." Participant C also stated, "You have to be involved and sometimes foster parents go above and beyond to be involved." The foster parent spent individual time with each child in her care each day. The time a foster parent invests into the relationship with the child influences the child's education.

Foster parents also spend time communicating with the agency on behalf of the children in care. Participant E requested a move to private school for her first-grade student and repeated the request again over the summer because it had been denied. Participant E said, "I had that call again with the state." Participant A insisted on having services for her first-grade child in care. Participant H shared, "I communicated to overcome the barrier of just that navigating the work between case management and between the foster parent." Participant H had previously explained that difficulty with case management can be a barrier. The foster parent described the communication in more detail, "I made sure that I understood who the case manager supervisor was, who the unit supervisor was, and I just worked my way up." Effective communication between the foster parent and the agency has the potential to overcome barriers.

The communication between the foster parent and the school, which may include participation at school events, can also be influential. During a field day at school, Participant E noticed problems in her student's classroom. Participant E said, "And I went to a couple of field



days, and I looked around the school, and I noticed there were like nine first grade classes, and the one that he was in was just a crazy mess.” Participant H spent a lot of time volunteering at the school her sons attended. “And my strategy then, and my strategy now is to be in the school classrooms with all of my boys,” Participant H said. Participant D also spends time in the school. The foster parent talked about parent-teacher conferences and volunteering. Participant D said, “I’m going on to field trips with them. Just trying to tell them that I’m on your side.” Physical presence at the school can help foster parents understand the school environment and can help teachers develop a partnership with the parents.

Foster parents also utilize other school communication methods. For example, Participant B can communicate with teachers using a notebook. Participant B explained, “The teacher will give them, they have a color code for their behavior, so if they’re good that day they would get like purple or yellow or red is bad, and then the teacher will write a little note about what they did that was wrong; I usually communicate with the teacher through the notebook.” Participant D discussed the use of apps to communicate with teachers. Participant D said, “They have an app called Class Dojo,” and shared how the teachers can use the app to share when students are released from school. Applications and notebooks can help parents to communicate with the school without being physically present in the school.

Many participants shared communication advice for future foster parents. Participant A shared, “I would encourage people to be upfront and not be afraid to let anybody know what’s going on because it’s gonna help them help your child.” Emphasizing the value of communication, Participant D stated, “There is not much you can do actually, besides keeping those communication channels open.” Participant H shared these recommendations, “Educate yourself about the system, and communicate with the teachers and the other folks who are going

to be with your kids on a daily basis, makes such a difference.” Effective communication is important to foster parents.

Many foster parents had to navigate the education process on their own, which requires self-initiative. Participant G said, “Pretty much my experience with foster care is, what I’ve learned is, I have to do all on my own.” Participant D explained various trainings and master classes she had attended as well as resources and tools she had found. Participant. D said, “It’s all been me taking the initiative.” Similarly, Participant B stated “I just learned as I went,” and Participant C shared, “So, I’ve just learned on my own how to be an advocate for kids with special needs through trial and error just dealing with that with him.” Foster parents are willing to take the initiative to learn how to advocate for the children in their care.

Advocating for the child is an important behavior of foster parents. Foster parents often need to be vocal about the needs of the child in their care. Participant H shared, “I was really forceful and vocal about the need for the boys to have those things.” Sharing the importance of speaking out, Participant G said, “So just me being me, I guess, taking the initiative and doing what needs to be done for these children who have no voice and are kind of in transitions.” Participant E explained her process, saying, “I just go to battle, become mama bear, and try to push as hard as I can to get them what they need. It doesn’t always work.” Participant D shared, “And that’s when I said, I need to take this into my hands, otherwise, this kid is not gonna thrive.” Foster parent advocacy impacted the outcomes of children in care.

Foster parents recommended becoming a strong advocate to future foster parents. Participant G said, “I would tell any foster parent, advocate for your child. He’s yours while he’s with you. You do everything you can. Pretend he’s going to be with you forever, and you just do what’s best for his education.” When asked about preparing future foster parents, Participant D

shared, “Number one, be ready to become an advocate.” Advocating for the needs of children in care is an important responsibility of the foster parent.

### **Evidence of Quality**

All participants in the research met specific criteria. Each participant was licensed in the state of Florida to foster and had placement of an elementary-aged child for at least four academic months. Additionally, each participant had taken at least one elementary placement no earlier than 2019. Eight foster parents, with unique histories and backgrounds, completed the interview process. Some foster parents were married with children, and others were single and had never had children. Some foster parents entered the foster care system with significant background knowledge and experience, while others learned about the system after becoming a foster parent. Some elements of the answers converged, while other answers separated based on unique experiences. The variety adds to the richness and quality of the data, but the unanimity of other responses speaks strongly to the elements of the shared experiences of children in foster care.

The data presented have thick, rich descriptions of the participants, which demonstrates the validity of the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Each participant in the data was a foster parent in the state of Florida between the ages of 41 and 70. However, the participants came from a variety of backgrounds and had varying reasons for becoming foster parents. The themes emerged from the collective experiences of eight different foster parents. The experiences shared may be transferable to the experiences of foster parents in other states as well as from other demographics.

The analysis of the data was performed on accounts that were meaningfully descriptive, not primarily consisting of opinions. Participants shared actual events and experiences of the

children in care. For example, participants shared specific conversations and communication strategies. Participants also shared the daily events that compose the routine and structure within the home. The particular events and happenings of the children allow the analysis to capture the educational experiences of children in care. The meaningful events and experiences that constitute the data set ensure the study meets the criteria of quality phenomenological research (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The study provides deep insights into the educational experiences of children in foster care and connects to the ethics of community practices, an important part of quality phenomenological research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The themes explain the shared experiences of children in foster care from the perspective of foster parents. Through the themes, the community can better understand the complex nature of the needs of children in care and the commitment and connection necessary to meet the needs. In many cases, current practices failed to sufficiently meet the needs of children in foster care. Therefore, practices should be reevaluated and modified to better meet the needs of children in care.

### **Summary**

Understanding the educational experience of children in foster care can better enable communities to meet the needs of children in care. Although the story of each child is unique, comprehending the fundamental elements of the experience of a child can inform best practices and can enable community leaders to provide meaningful supports and services. Children in care constitute a vulnerable population. Struggling through the deficiencies of the current system, not all the needs for children in care are meaningfully met. Many children face ongoing educational challenges throughout their time in foster care, but effective supports and practices of foster parents can positively influence the experience of children in care.

## V. DISCUSSION

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the educational experiences among elementary-aged children in foster care in Florida through the perspectives of their foster parents. The research provided an understanding of the holistic educational experience of elementary children in care, but also provided insight into the characteristics of foster parents. A criterion-based sample of foster parents provided rich descriptions of the lives of the children in their care through interviews. Coding the transcripts enabled the researcher to uncover the themes: challenges, meeting needs, deficiencies, support system, and behaviors of foster parents. The themes generate meaningful discussion regarding the preparation of foster parents and the educational experiences of children in care.

### **Methods of Data Collection**

The researcher obtained an appropriate sample by utilizing social media connection with local foster groups, and then communicating the need for participants. Participants privately provided contact information. Before selecting the participants, the researcher called to verify the criteria: to participate, the foster parent must have been licensed in the state of Florida, have taken placement of an elementary-aged child for at least four months, and the placement could not be earlier than 2019. Once verified, the researcher sent each participant a demographic survey to gather data and confirm that each participant met the criteria for participation. The researcher gathered a sample of eight participants.

Interviews of each participant took place online through Zoom video calls. The Zoom platform recorded the interviews and provided a transcript of each interview. The researcher read through each transcript and corrected any errors. Upon correction, the transcripts were emailed individually to each participant for verification. If the participant noted any errors, the researcher responded with an updated transcript. All transcripts were verified before the data analysis process began.

During data analysis, the researcher reread the transcripts multiple times and coded the transcripts. All statements from the interview were put into an Excel file where the statements were labeled with a code, and an explanation was provided. The codes were then collapsed according to common threads throughout the eight interviews. Upon review of the collapsed codes, five themes emerged. The themes are challenges, meeting needs, deficiencies, support system, and behaviors of foster parents.

### **Discussion by Research Question**

The data shared by participants provided insight not only into the educational experience of children in care, but also into the preparations and behaviors of foster parents. Children in foster care experience the phenomena of education whilst living with persons other than their birth family and learning to navigate new environments. The interviewed foster parents interacted with the children to navigate the educational journey alongside them.

#### **Research Question 1**

What are the educational experiences of elementary-aged children in foster care from the perspective of foster parents?

The experiences of children in foster care, while sharing the common themes of challenges, meeting needs, deficiencies, support system, and behaviors of foster parents, are

complex and varied. Bronfenbrenner (1979) emphasized the study of not only the environment the child functions in but also the interaction between the child and the environment.

Additionally, the development of a child involves the interactions of various parts of a child's environment, such as the interactions between parents and teachers (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The interactions of a child with the agency, with the foster parents, with the birth parents, with the school, and with the community all play a role in the development of the education of a child and make up the microsphere. Additionally, the interactions between the agency and the foster parents, between the school and the foster parents, and between all the various elements of a child's environment play a critical role.

A notable example of the importance of the mesosphere, which is the interaction of the parts of the microsphere, is the educational experience of the child cared for by Participant E. The elementary-aged boy experienced negative interactions with the school, coming home angry. To notice the child becoming angry, Participant E had to interact with the child in her care. However, it was not until Participant E herself interacted with the school that she initiated the decision to move the child to a private school. Then, Participant E communicated with the agency. Although the interaction was negative, Participant E persisted on behalf of the child in her care and was eventually able to move the second-grade student in her care to a private school. At this point, the second-grade student interacted positively with the school and began thriving educationally. Participant E also interacted with the birth mother and the private school. Because of the relationship developed, when the student reunified with his birth mother, he continued to attend the private school. Participant E not only maintained a supportive relationship with the child, but effectively bridged the relationship of the private school to

support the birth mother. The interaction between the various elements of the child's environment enabled him to thrive beyond his time in foster care.

Children in foster care face obstacles, but obstacles can be overcome. As previous research has stated, a consistent, stable foster home can help youth in care to overcome educational hurdles (Plante, 2017; Rosenberg & Kim, 2018). Although each child in care faces unique circumstances, each child can experience progress and growth. However, changing a child's educational path takes effort. Children in care thrive in routine and structure, but children also need connections.

Developing meaningful relationships benefits the educational experience of children in care. Foster parents spent time demonstrating love and developing relationships with children in care whether through conversations or shared experiences. Previous research aligns with the finding that children in care thrive in connections (Morton, 2017; Philyaw, 2020). When children develop healthy relationships and feel stable in a home, they can thrive in many ways, including academically.

Connecting to a child and meeting their needs takes time. Children in care do not transform overnight. Adjusting to a new environment and transitioning effectively into that environment require consistency and stability. There are no simple solutions to fixing a child's educational gaps or behavioral challenges. The best solutions to educational needs require a holistic understanding of the child's experiences. Helping children in care to develop academically entails developing meaningful relationships and establishing effective structures.

## **Research Question 2**

How are foster parents prepared to assist children in foster care in their educational experience?



All foster parents interviewed felt unprepared to meet the educational needs of children in care. Any preparation they had was due to their own initiatives, not training provided by the agency. However, rather than seeing lack of preparation as a hindrance, each foster parent launched into the work of self-education and advocacy. Through determination, the foster parents were able to meet the needs of the children in care. The foster parents sought answers and solutions, trainings, and resources. When a need arose that they could not meet, foster parents advocated on behalf of children in their care. An effective network is more important to the success of a foster home than a significant knowledge base.

Participant D demonstrated both a willingness to learn how to meet needs of children in care and how to advocate for her child. The fourth-grade student in the care of Participant D needed help with self-regulating. Having been to many TBRI trainings held at her church, Participant D pulled from her knowledge of trauma-based care to provide needed structures at home, such as a space for time-in. Resources like morning routine checklists found on Etsy also helped Participant D meet the needs of the child in her care. However, Participant D could not replace the child's teacher at school. When the school was not meeting her needs, she said to them, "But this is your territory. This is your environment. You control this. What can you do to help my little girl?" She became an advocate for her daughter who was not able to advocate for herself. Foster parents are teachable regarding methods to meet the needs of children in care and are also able to become advocates for the children in their care.

The lack of preparation many foster parents experience does not diminish their ability to meet the needs of children in care. The other characteristics of foster parents, such as communication abilities and teachable attitudes, overshadow the inadequacies of training. Many foster parents in this study saw educational gains for their children, but some saw children

completely transformed from academic failures to educational successes. The educational experience of children is influenced by the mesosphere, including the interactions of foster parents with other community members (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Support systems, communication, and advocacy, alongside the structure and routine established in the home, allowed foster parents to meet the needs of children in care and to ultimately change the trajectory of the educational experience of children in care.

A great illustration of the need for children in care to have good, highly functioning homes is the story of Participant H. Eventually adopting all three boys, Participant H and her husband took in brothers who were already living in a foster home. Toward the end of the interview, she reflected on the educational growth and progress of her sons. All three boys have thrived and grown even though all of them had significant deficiencies. She said, “All three of them are amazingly talented academically.” However, she added, “I don't think that that would have been realized or recognized if they had remained in the foster care system in that same space that they were in when they came to us.” The unfortunate reality is the three boys could have stayed in a different foster home where they were not advocated for. Had that been the case, the three boys could have remained behind grade level for their entire academic career. The need for effective advocacy for children is great because without the proper advocacy and support, some children do not have the opportunity to thrive.

Based on the testimony of foster parents regarding the educational experiences of children in care, the foster parents are unable to meet the needs of children in care without support. However, the agency also remains unable to meet the needs of children in care without foster parents, in part due to burnout faced by social workers (Johnson, 2020). The agency and the foster parent must communicate and work cohesively, but even so, the need for children in

care remains substantial. For children to thrive educationally, the community needs to provide additional support. Fortunately, some communities are beginning to provide wraparound support for foster parents (Barrick, 2021; Griffith, 2019).

Children in care need stability and connection to thrive, but foster parents alone cannot handle the burden. Foster parents can advocate for children in care and meet many needs, but without a network of support, some needs remain unmet. Unfortunately, foster parents do not have the capacity to know how to meet every potential need of children in care. Participant F stated, “A lot of people just don’t know, and so they don’t ask, and then they have to go through the process whether they get the services that they need or they don’t.” The reality is that not every child receives the services they need even if those services are available. Foster parents need community support and effective communication from the community and agency in order to successfully meet the needs of children in care.

Children in care may come with a variety of needs, but many people desire to meet those needs. Many foster parents develop a safe environment in which children can thrive, and they advocate on behalf of children in care. Additionally, community support groups work to help foster parents meet the needs of children in care. Although the agency may have deficiencies, the agency is able to provide services and supports to children in care to help them thrive academically. Working together, the agency, foster parents, and community can positively influence children in care and provide the opportunity to thrive academically.

### **Implications for Future Practice**

Understanding the educational experiences of children in foster care and the preparation of foster parents enriches the ability of a community to help children in care. Foster parents and fostering agencies need additional support from the community to meet the variety of needs.

Instead of trying to meet more needs themselves, agencies should create better connections between foster parents and community resources. The findings affirm previous research that children thrive in stability (Navarro-Soria et al., 2020; Plante, 2017), and the community can help maintain stability for a child in care by supporting the child and the foster family (Barrick, 2021; Griffith, 2019).

A burnout cycle exists in foster care that must be broken to meet the needs of children in care. Case managers burn out (Johnson, 2020). The findings affirm the burnout as participants described high turnover rates or poor communication from the agency. Additionally, foster parents can face significant strain and emotional challenges. The foster parents in this study were either still currently licensed or had completed their last case through to adoption. However, many other children in care face disruptions, and Vreeland et al. (2020) provided evidence that school troubles are associated with shorter placements and more placements. Case managers need to place children into stable homes, but stable homes are not always available. Foster parents need to provide a stable home, but do not often receive the desired level of communication and support from the agency.

An outside group can step in to break the cycle of dysfunction. Community groups, organizations, and leaders can step in to assist foster parents and agencies. Many community groups exist offering services such as funding, tutoring, babysitting, meals, and clothing. The services provided by outside community groups take a burden from foster parents and from the agency. The additional stability improves the longevity of a foster home, allowing case managers to better place children. When children are more effectively placed, foster homes are more likely to thrive. Effective community supports can break the cycle of dysfunction in the foster care system.

The agency should strive to provide the best support possible to a family, but whenever possible, the agency should allow community organizations to provide needed services. Increasing the use of community support increases the autonomy of the foster parents and takes a burden off the agency. For example, if a community organization provides effective tutoring, the case manager should not utilize an agency member but should connect the foster parent to the organization. The agency can then focus on the communication and work that must be agency driven, such as effective communication regarding visitation.

To communicate regarding the community support available, the agency should collect the names and contact information of available support groups. The supports could include non-profit organizations, foster parent support groups, churches offering support, private school funding options, or other community organizations. The collection of data should include what service is provided by the organization. Many methods exist for disbursing the information, whether through the licensing and relicensing process or the training and retraining process. For example, a 30-minute training video highlighting the services provided could become a required part of annual training hours. The training video can ensure that all foster parents are aware of the resources available and how to obtain use of those supports.

Though a variety of community supports can aid foster families, a wrap-around model of support can meet many needs of foster parents and children in care. Wraparound care is creating a network of support around foster families, meeting needs such as babysitting, clothing, and meals (Barrick, 2021). Youth are positively impacted by wraparound supports because the supports are designed to increase the longevity and effectiveness of foster families enabling the families to provide stability (Barrick, 2021; Griffith, 2019). Some participants in this study benefited from support through a church whether it was providing a training session or bringing

a meal. Foster parents have tangible needs but also emotional needs. The needs of foster parents and the children placed in the foster home can be better met if the foster parents have a support network.

Agencies and schools should reflect on what decisions foster parents can make on behalf of children in care. The foster parent engages with the child daily and observes the educational experience closely. However, the foster parent does not always determine where the child is able to attend school or what supports the child may have while at school. Agencies should consider providing more opportunity for foster parents to find optimal school placements for children in care. Schools should consider lessening the difficulty of obtaining accommodations for children in care. Although the child in care may not have a learning disability or diagnosis, the trauma of removal itself can cause disruption to a child and can affect academic progress. Some foster parents successfully navigated the IEP process, but others found it frustrating. The more accessible supports are to children in care, the better able a foster parent can meet the needs of a child in care.

The dueling realities are that children in care have often been through significant trauma and challenges, yet the children in care can heal and thrive. In order to heal and thrive, the children need stability and connection. The time foster parents invest into a child in care helps the child to become stable. When the child is stable, the child can thrive academically. Foster parents help the child in care by working toward meaningful relationship and working together to overcome challenges.

Additional implications include the foster parent skills of advocacy and communication that benefit children in care. Foster parents step in to advocate for the needs of children in care, even if a member of the agency did not support the foster parent. Foster parents communicated

the needs for services and the need for a different school setting. In addition to agency communication, foster parents communicate with the school. Foster parents took time to develop a positive school and home relationship. Volunteering in the school or attending field trips created positive dynamics between the teacher and the home. Investing time into effective communication and advocacy are important behaviors of foster parents that benefit children in care.

### **Study Limitations**

All participants from the study were licensed to foster in the state of Florida. The study does not include information regarding the differences in the foster care experience across different states. Additionally, the participants of the study were all between the ages of 41 and 70 and were either Caucasian, Hispanic, or Latino. The study does not include information regarding the distinct experiences of foster parents or youth in care from different ethnic backgrounds. The study does include participants from a variety of educational settings and educational needs but focused on the wholistic experiences rather than specific comparisons between the different settings and needs.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Children in care experience a variety of educational needs and challenges, but foster parents are not always able to find the best school to meet those needs. Further research should be conducted regarding the outcomes of children whose foster parents chose private school compared to children whose foster parents were denied the choice and remained in public school. Additional research on this topic could include the outcomes for children in foster care who are homeschooled. As Participant D stated, “Maybe it will be good research to find out the difference between a family that does home schooling with foster kids and the ones that send

them to a public school.” Not all children in care thrive in a public-school setting, and more research should be done to explore successful alternatives.

Additional research should be conducted regarding medicating children in care. Many participants shared experiences regarding medicating children with educational needs. In some cases, navigating the process was challenging while for others it was simple. In all cases, the foster parents provided no discussion about other options. In one case where the medication was changed, the child in care had come from a living situation where drug abuse was a problem. Research needs to be done to explore alternatives to medication for children in care and how to make alternatives accessible to foster families. Children need interventions to learn emotional regulation and focus, but medication is not the only option. While medication was not the focus of this research study, the information gathered illustrates that psychotropic medication is commonplace to the point other options are not discussed. Research should be conducted to determine whether using psychotropic medication for children in care is the best practice, and if so, in what cases are psychotropic medications the best option.

### **Significance**

Children in foster care are a vulnerable population, unable to advocate for their own needs. The findings of this study allow the community to understand the educational experiences of children in foster care and the preparation of foster parents. When the community can understand what children in care go through, the community can engage with fostering homes to provide needed supports.

Children in care face unique challenges and have a variety of needs that foster parents strive to meet. Though some children in care thrive academically, many children in care must overcome academic gaps and delays. Fostering parents are best able to meet the needs of



children in care through structure and connection. Facilitating structure and developing connections takes time. The process can be difficult for foster parents, but the child has the potential to thrive in a stable, loving environment. Understanding the daily challenges of caring for a child in foster care allows the community to develop effective supports, easing a burden from foster parents and enabling them to effectively meet the needs of children in care.

Foster parents communicate and advocate for children in care. Understanding the significance of effective communication and advocacy allows for better preparation of future foster parents. Giving foster parents a specific knowledge base proved to be less important than empowering foster parents to advocate and communicate. Foster parents desire to find the best options for children in care. Some foster parents took time to realize the opportunities available to them, such as the option to send a child to private school. The agencies should shift their focus from providing a specific knowledge base to connecting foster parents with effective resources.

### **Conclusion**

Children in care need the support and help of the community to recover from the dysfunction they have experienced. Understanding the challenges children in care face enables fostering agencies, foster parents, and community organizations to help children overcome obstacles. The needs of children in care are diverse, but the supports available are diverse as well. Unfortunately, the current system contains deficiencies, so many children have needs that are not met. But even amid a system with deficiencies, foster parents have successfully helped children overcome educational hurdles by providing stability, developing connections, and embracing advocacy. Increasing community support can strengthen foster families and improve a community's ability to meet the needs of children in care. The needs in the foster care system are great, but the potential for healing and growth is also substantial. Understanding the educational

experiences of children in foster care from the perspective of the foster parent enables the community, the agency, and the foster parents to change the course of a child's life for the better.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Data Collection Google Form**

1. Have you received the consent form?
2. Are you currently a licensed foster parent in the state of Florida
3. Was this placement no earlier than 2019
4. What is your age?
5. How long have you been a licensed foster parent?
6. What is your ethnicity?
7. In which county are/were you licensed to foster?

## **Appendix B**

### **Interview Questions**

Script: Thank you for your participation in this interview. Your participation in this interview is voluntary. You have signed and submitted your consent form to participate in this interview. However, we will still respect your decision of whether or not you want to be in the interview. If you decide to complete the interview now, you can still change your mind later. If you feel stressed during the interview, you may stop at any time. You may skip any questions that you feel are too personal.

Question 1: Tell me about your experience becoming a foster parent.

Question 2: Tell me about the elementary aged child that you care for.

Prompt: What educational exceptionalities does your child have?

Question 3: What preparation did you receive to assist children in their educational needs?

Question 4: What is a typical school day experience with your child?

Question 5: What supports are most beneficial to helping your child educationally?

Prompt: Supports could range from family and friends, after school programs, services from the state, or other supports.

Question 6: What barriers exist that hinder your child's academic success?

Question 7: What strategies do you use to overcome those barriers?

Question 8: From your experience with your child's educational care, how would you prepare future foster parents?

Question 9: From your life experiences, what else would you like to contribute regarding the educational experiences of children in foster care?

## **Appendix C**

### **Script**

Hello! My name is Autumn Brueckmann. I am currently a locally licensed foster parent and I am working on my doctoral thesis. My research is about the educational experience of children in foster care, and I am looking for participants to interview! If you currently have or have recently had an elementary aged child placed with you, please message me with your preferred method of contact so that we can schedule a zoom interview! In these interviews, you will simply share about the experiences of the child in your care. Your identity and the identity of the child placed with you will be kept confidential. If you have any questions or concerns about participating, please do not hesitate to ask!

**Appendix D**  
**Consent Form**

You are invited to take part in a research interview on the educational experience of children in foster care. You were chosen for the interview because of your fostering experience. Please read this form and ask any questions you have before agreeing to be part of the interview.

This interview is being conducted by a researcher named Autumn Brueckmann, who is a doctoral student at Southeastern University.

**Background Information:**

The purpose of this interview is to collect information regarding the educational experiences of children in foster care.

**Procedures:**

If you agree, you will be asked to participate in an video-recorded and audio-recorded interview, lasting approximately 60 minutes.

**Voluntary Nature of the Interview:**

Your participation in this interview is voluntary. This means that everyone will respect your decision of whether or not you want to be in the interview. If you decide to join the interview now, you can still change your mind later. If you feel stressed during the interview, you may stop at any time. You may skip any questions that you feel are too personal.

#### Risks and Benefits of Being in the Interview:

There is the minimal risk of psychological stress during this interview. If you feel stressed during the interview, you may stop at any time. There are no benefits to you from participating in this interview. The interviewer will benefit by gathering information regarding the educational experiences of children in foster care.

#### Compensation:

There is no compensation for participating in this interview.

#### Confidentiality:

Any information you provide will be kept confidential. The researcher will not use your information for any outside purposes. Also, the researcher will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in any reports of the interview. The researcher will code any personal identifiers before publication.

#### Contacts and Questions:

The researcher's name is Autumn Brueckmann. The researcher's dissertation chair is Dr. Ingle. The researcher's methodologist is Dr. Deck. You may ask any questions you have now. Or if you have questions later, you may contact the researcher, dissertation chair, or methodologist via email at [ambrueckmann@seu.com](mailto:ambrueckmann@seu.com), [kmingle@seu.edu](mailto:kmingle@seu.edu), or [jldeck@seu.edu](mailto:jldeck@seu.edu), respectively. If you want to communicate privately about your rights as a participant, you can call Dr. Janet Deck, the Chair of the Southeastern University EdD program, at [jldeck@seu.edu](mailto:jldeck@seu.edu).

The researcher will give you a copy of this form to keep. Please sign this consent form.  
Then, scan and email a copy to [ambrueckmann@seu.edu](mailto:ambrueckmann@seu.edu).

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information. I have received answers to any questions I have at this time. I am 18 years of age or older, and I consent to participate in the interview.

Printed Name of  
Participant \_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's  
Written Signature \_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher's  
Written Signature \_\_\_\_\_